M. SINCLAIR

EXPLORING FAE

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Lost In Fae - Book 2

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Exploring Fae
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The Union of Love & Madness

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Stalk me… really, I'm into it.

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DESCRIPTION

My name is Maize.

Poisonous to the touch.

The bastard child of one very dead Dark Fae King.

A refugee of a war that freed me from my three-year imprisonment.

Eager to explore a kingdom that, while not welcoming, could hold everything I'd ever dreamed for. Hope. Hope for a real future. That was if someone didn't kill me first due to their hatred of what I represented.

I had chosen to return to the Horde, and I knew I'd be held to that choice and the consequences associated with it. I was just hoping that the bad—whether that be in the form of the outright harassment experienced at the Red Masque Academy or a possibly much more sinister plan—would not outweigh the good.

I knew that the seven commanders wanted me here. Queen Gray wanted me here. That should be enough for me. Enough to counteract the insecurity I felt on a daily basis of not being wanted.

So for now, all I could do was explore. Explore what staying meant, explore my feelings for the men I found myself living with, and more than anything else… explore who I was becoming as a non-imprisoned woman. I wanted to be stronger than I'd been in the past and focus on healing from the trauma I'd experienced.

That small smidgen of hope I had was like a lifeline.

Exploring Fae is book 2 in the **Lost In Fae** series. This PNR/Fantasy RH is part of the M. Sinclair Horde universe but can be read as a standalone series (feel free to check out the others as well for a more encompassing

understanding of the universe and cameos). Prepare yourself for a strong but haunted MFC that meets men that may be the best or worst thing for her. Undetermined.

Book will contain swearing. As well, please be advised that the book contains darker themes including assault, PTSD, and violence. Additionally, sexual themes are suitable for mature audiences +18. Burn level - slow/medium.

Exploring Fae will end on a cliffhanger. Lost in Fae 3 is available for pre-order.

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GLOSSARY

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1. *Tu a besoin de te relaxer* : You need to relax.
2. *Il sait exactement ce qu'il fait* : He knows exactly what he's doing.
3. *Il l'aime* : He loves her.

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PROLOGUE

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MAIZE

Why was I outside?

White, frozen crystals clouded my vision as I forced my eyes open, my lashes almost frozen together. I tried to focus on the ground beneath me. I swayed slightly, feeling as though I was going to face-plant forward into the thick, frozen snow that my hands were half-buried in, my fingers having gone numb. I frowned, tracking a blue flash of color in the white, icy texture underneath me, only to realize that it was my nails… My nails were blue. *That wasn't good.*

A whimper broke from my lips as I tried to pull my hands from the snow, the stark, hard land cradling my frame as my arms shook and wobbled. I could tell I'd been out here for some time because my skin was nearly translucent, my arms so numb that they almost didn't feel like they were attached to me anymore.

Why was I out here to begin with?

My eyes fluttered shut again as I attempted to shift myself from where I was sitting on my legs. I let out a small pained noise, raw unfiltered shocks of energy going through my limbs, almost turning me immobile.

Holy hell, that hurt.

I felt my body sink to the side slightly, my form nearly breaking under the pain as I tried to brace myself from falling completely, my dark, frozen hair covering my face in icy strings.

Had I been dunked in water before being left out here? Hell, maybe that was what had happened, because I felt like I was suffering from hypothermia. The memory loss… the inability to move my body… I was

thinking that was my best bet and probably the reason I couldn't remember how the hell I'd gotten here.

Where had I been before this?

Why didn't I recognize where I was?

Shakily reaching up to my face, hot tears broke through the numbness as they streaked down my cheeks in panic.

Why was I panicking? It was like my body was reacting without permission from my mind. I hadn't even realized I was upset enough to cry. Maybe… maybe it was the hard wind blowing across my face… but somehow I knew that wasn't the case. Something had happened. Something that had worked me into this state. The back of my eyes were hot as my pulse increased with fear.

I had felt a lot recently, but this level of fear was something new.

Unfortunately, the more I tried to remember, the more it hurt, a whimper leaving my lips as the back of my head pulsed in pain. *Yeah, pretty sure I didn't need those memories for now.* Reaching a shaky hand back to touch my head, bile rose in my throat almost instantly at the wound I practically dug my fingers into. I mean, it was not the worst I'd ever experienced by far, but fuck, it was bad. I confirmed the injury as I brought my fingers back in front of me, the thick, almost oil-like texture of blood dripping off my fingers and down onto the nightgown I wore.

Now that didn't seem like something I would normally wear.

The basic white slip was tinted with the crimson color of my blood as mercury silver tears continued to fall and mix with the red substance, creating a rather stunning iridescent shade that had me starring with interest. *Morbid* interest, but interest nonetheless.

I think I was in shock.

My back twitched as if trying to release a pressure that was building there, but instead I hit a solid wall. My familiars and power were seemingly absent from my consciousness as my vision swam, causing me to feel off balance. I swallowed, trying to keep some level of calm, refusing to give into the full panic attack I could feel building. Not until I was safe.

Where was safe, though?

Safety was with my… the word was escaping me. Warmth and large bodies filled my memory, but I didn't know who they belonged to. A memory flashed before my eyes, just a moment, that I didn't fully understand but had me feeling a surge of strength and energy.

“Maize,” a soft, persuasive voice spoke against my ear, causing chills to break across my flushed skin. “You need to sleep.”

“I’m scared to fall asleep and hurt one of you, more specifically, you,” I admitted, smelling the scent of sweetness and sunshine mixed with rose. A firm set of arms was wrapped around my waist, and out of the corner of my eye I could see a flash of rose-colored hair from the originator of the voice. The body in front of me shifted, a head of golden hair buried against my neck, and a pair of lips pressed against a small star tattoo on my collarbone. A blush worked its way up my cheeks.

Why did I feel like the way he was holding me was unusual? Exciting, but something different than expected? I let out a small hum of contentment as the man behind me kissed my ear gently, causing me to naturally sink into the soft sheets.

“Trust me, Maize. We can take care of ourselves, I promise you.” His voice was convincing and almost magical, my eyes closing and feeling heavy. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help it—I was giving into sleep with his soft, comforting voice lulling me into a state of darkness and safety.

Who were those men? I knew them. I couldn’t put a full face or name to them, though, making me feel an acute sense of loss. Maybe if I calmed down I would be able to remember better. Maybe that was the key. I mean, there had to be a reason for all of this. Right?

Before I could think further on it, a savage wind blasted through the space, causing me to nearly fall back over. Instead, I braced against it, the wind seeming to scream in anger as if I’d done something wrong, trying to forcibly tear the skin from my body. It hurt so much. Squinting around, I tried to see past the thick pines that were coated in icicles surrounding me in every single direction like a maze. There had to be somewhere safe to go. How did I land myself here? Wherever *here* was.

If I couldn’t remember how I had gotten here, how the hell was I going to get back?

I think I’d been in bed before this, with those large men… but why? I mean, who were they? Fuck. All of this sounded vaguely correct, but the details were muddled. There was something more there. Something I wasn’t understanding that had turned such a comfortable, safe scene into something much darker. Much more dangerous. A reason I was no longer sleeping, and it was frustrating and alarming to not be able to tell you why that was exactly.

Suddenly, above me, the full moon broke out from cloud cover to shine brilliantly down onto me like a spotlight for the entire forest to focus in on. Silver light surrounded me, highlighting my pain and confusion. My memories began to try to push forward, ones that I *did* remember from the severe trauma I'd suffered before… well, before whenever this was. Was I escaping from Mario's dungeon? Maybe that was what was happening. Or they had left me out here to die.

The memory of shadows and darkness began to cause me to panic as anxiety invaded my chest, causing me to squeeze my eyes shut. No. Fuck no. I could not go there right now. I couldn't trade my PTSD anxiety attack for whatever the hell was going on. The moon shone bright enough that it allowed me to ignore that it was night. To ignore the memories of being tied up and tortured down in a dungeon for three years of my life.

Just find somewhere safe.

Suddenly, the space filled with a familiar howl that had nothing to do with the wind and everything to do with a creature that was clearly at home within this forested terrain. It should have terrified me, but instead a sigh of relief broke from my lips, as if I knew who the howl belonged to. My skin broke out into shivers, craving their presence as I began to look around me eagerly searching for its originator.

I knew who this was… I just couldn't tell you their name.

I tried to call out, their name right on the tip of my tongue, but all that was emitted was a raspy squeak. I couldn't find my voice, and it was so goddamn frustrating that I felt like hitting my head against one of these trees. I needed something to break me from this state. Something to jog my memory.

When the next vicious howl sounded, it was from further away, and I desperately tried to let out some type of noise, needing them to hear me. To not abandon me. To come help me. I knew they were looking for me, and they were going the wrong way! I was so goddamn terrified that they would leave me. That they'd never come back and leave me to slowly bleed out in the snow. Was that possible? Was this going to be my end?

Electricity ran over my skin as I screamed, tears streaming down my face as my father laughed softly. I could barely see out of my swollen eyes from the well-aimed kicks the guards laid, but in the corner, I could see Victor hitting his head against the wall. Why wouldn't he help me? I let out another scream, not even caring that my father was laughing as he got not

only my magic but continued to get a sick, sadistic thrill from the torturous treatment.

"How have you not died yet, sweet girl?" my father mused, his eyes appearing above me. "Is it because your spirit hasn't broken? That won't do."

I didn't fully understand what he meant until I was knocked out and woke back up in my cage, restrained once again, a soldier watching me from the entrance, looking amused. Almost instantly, my wings bent around me protectively as I looked around at the wires and electric cords that were connected to different pieces of me. I followed them towards a large, gritty machine that the soldier stood next to.

"Your father wants me to break you, but I don't think it will be that easy, now will it?" he purred. "You are going to scream and cry, pretty little bug, but you and I are going to be together for a long time to come."

That was when he turned on the electricity, sending thousands of volts through me all at once. I didn't pass out. I didn't scream. I didn't cry. I found myself completely escaping into a sense of numbness, rage coating my need to one day kill him. Kill my father.

One day.

My muscles groaned as I struggled to stand, the blood-soaked earth underneath me like a crimson stain of death against the winter scene. I would not be distracted. I couldn't stop the vivid memories, but fuck—I would not let it end me.

My eyes flickered shut as everything swarmed around me dangerously. Blood trickled down the back of my neck, and I briefly wondered why I wasn't healing. I was bleeding out, and I didn't understand how that was possible. How any of this was possible. Why had my magic abandoned me? Where had my familiars gone? I knew if I looked, my tattoos would be absent. I'd bet money on it.

Why wasn't there anyone else looking for me? Who had I expected to come after me, exactly?

I didn't have anyone, and I knew that.

Feeling determined to stay upright, I swallowed down the bile as I made my way to the first tree nearby. I gripped the freezing, icy bark, not minding the bite of cold, as I heard a snarl from somewhere close. Hope surged through me as I looked around eagerly.

A small sound of defiance broke from my throat at the weird, strangling hold this place seemed to have on me. I refused to give up.

I had survived so goddamn much. Torture. Imprisonment. I wasn't about to die from a head injury or hypothermia. Absolutely fucking not. The anger that surged through me was hot and melted some of the numbness over me, but unfortunately it also brought the pain that I'd been avoiding.

Almost as if sensing and backing down from my determination, the wind quieted, and the snarl nearby cut off. Everything went absolutely silent. No creatures. No wind. Absolutely nothing. A chill of apprehension rolled over my spine as I felt a dark energy pulse across my skin, attempting to force me to my knees.

I bared my teeth and gripped the tree harder, unable to accept the notion of kneeling for someone I didn't know. Someone I didn't respect. I hadn't knelt for Mario, and I wouldn't kneel for this invasive power.

Then it was gone. Lifted by a soothing feminine voice infused with power. A weird calm took over my frame, protectively coating me, and my pain was temporarily lifted, causing me to let out a ragged breath of relief.

"Maize, you need to wake up. Now."

I opened my mouth, not expecting words to come out, but a croaked response slipped from my lips. "Who the fuck are you? Where are you?"

There. Those were goddamn questions.

Instead of seeing anyone, a dark, almost black mist infused with sparkles surrounded my ankles as a firm, small hand pressed against the back of my head. I cried out, feeling fingers brush inside the open wound. I felt like someone had taken an axe to the back of my head, and this creature, this woman, was sticking her hand in it. I swore as her fingers were replaced by the cool energy I recognized as magic, the process of healing moving far quicker than normal. But with it came some of the pain I'd tried to block out, filtering through my system like a wave.

Oh fuck. How was I even up right now?

"They tried to kill you." she snarled once again, a figure appearing in front of me. I tried to rear back, but I was held in place as I stared in shock at the woman staring me in the eye. Dark eyes flashed underneath a dark hood as she cupped my jaw. "I woke to you knocking on my door. They sent you to me! *Me!* You let them. You must fight them, Maize. If you are going to win this, you have to fight."

“Who tried to kill me?” I demanded, tears streaking thickly as the pain intensified, my entire body trembling as I felt bile rise in my throat. I was going to throw up or pass out. One of those.

My body shuddered as two firm arms wrapped around me, a cool hand petting my hair in an almost maternal way, as a sensation pulsed in my chest telling me that I was close to death. For the first time in my life, I was actually in fear of my own mortality. I wanted to live. That much was clear. I had been freed. I wanted to live.

It would be a cruel fucking fate for me to die now.

You’ve been through so much, though… maybe this was how things were supposed to be. Maybe you were never meant to survive the treatment Mario served. Never meant to escape. Give into it.

“Wake up!” the woman demanded, making my eyes snap open as she shook me. “I have important plans for you, Maize. You are needed in this realm, so wake the fuck up.”

A gasp broke through me as a lightning bolt seemed to hit my chest, electrifying me as I felt stars explode in my vision, my body slumping against the tree. I let out a sob, gripping onto the tree as the woman’s magic disappeared, leaving only the pain from my healing injury. The wind picked up, and I struggled to force myself to push forward, moving from one tree to the next.

I didn’t know where I was going, but I couldn’t stay here.

I needed to wake up, whatever the fuck that meant. It was an order I couldn’t ignore.

My steps were shaky, and walking became harder the further I pushed, past tree after tree. After a few moments, I began to notice small, delicate black butterflies appearing in my peripheral. They didn’t seem to exist within the real world, though, because they floated, not affected in the least by the chilled wind. I didn’t realize it at first, but they were almost leading me in my path, appearing more in front of me than next to me as time continued, and I was trusting them, which was probably not the smartest idea. Maybe it was the blood loss…

I knew I was trailing blood after me, and my bare feet felt like they were being sliced open by glass. I wasn’t positive my body was going to recover from this without my magic. Why the fuck wasn’t my magic working? Or my wings?

After what felt like hours, the forest seemed to break into more familiar land.

Relief broke in my chest as I watched a familiar building rise in front of me, my memories trickling in, slow but strong, replacing those from the forest. I couldn't remember how I had found myself out here, but I knew in front of me was the Red Masques Academy. I knew that I wasn't supposed to be out here in the snow, bleeding and freezing. I knew, instinctively, that there were people looking for me.

A growl echoed closer this time, and I was able to attach the noise to a name. I had no idea how I knew it was him, but the primal sound sent shivers across my skin, causing my chest to radiate with surety as I sought out the large wolf. I had never seen him shifted, but I knew without a doubt that it was him. I just needed to find him…

"Cannon?" My voice was weak, but it was as loud as I could make it.

Almost immediately, the sound broke off as a massive, dark wolf with bright silver eyes appeared at the edge of the forest, coming to a hard stop. I breathed out a sigh of relief, my knees giving out as his shadow appeared in front of me. A whimper came from his throat as his nose nudged my tear-covered cheek. I wrapped my fingers in his fur as I closed my eyes, knowing I was now safe.

I gave into the darkness.

I gave into the pain.

I was familiar with it, and it was a comfortable reprieve from the confusion.

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAIT

Excruciating pain was an expectation in my life. An expectation formed from spending five years in a cage. Misery and depression had been a constant in my heart since then. Unavoidable.

Until I met Maize.

So it made sense that nothing quite compared to the pure terror and dread that seized me while hugging Maize's nearly lifeless body on the cold floor of the bathroom suite. Maddox adjusted the temperature of the tub he was leaning over, his energy intense and filled with pain, as I kept my gaze on her nearly blue face. Her pulse was slow but moving, crimson covering her iridescent skin, originating from the back of her neck and flowing down her white slip.

I refused to admit that it was blood. Her blood. I wasn't at a point of acceptance that I wouldn't lose my shit if that was the case.

This wasn't what she had fallen asleep in. It didn't smell like her.

A whine broke from my throat, the injury on the back of her head bleeding through the bandage we had hastily wrapped her wound in. I knew we could have done better, but honestly I was surprised any of us were managing to focus on what was going on besides the fact that she'd been clearly injured. Injured on our watch.

We hadn't protected her.

She was far more than half dead right now. Nothing about this was fucking okay.

It was probably why there were only a few of us that had yet to lose our shit completely. That group consisted of myself—somewhat—and Maddox. Zed was sort of included… but he wasn't allowed in the room right now.

His reaction to her blood was far too extreme, so he was waiting until one of the healers got here. They'd be able to fix her up faster than she was currently doing on her own. I needed to know she wouldn't stop breathing on me. I knew she was nearly indestructible… but seeing her like this, I realized I didn't fully believe that.

I didn't believe that she couldn't be taken away from me. Ripped away from my life like the blessing that she was, here one moment and gone the next. Honestly, it was something I would expect from my life, and I refused to let fate do that to me. My throat tightened as a numbness tried to take over, one that I was doing my best to fight. One that I had survived on while being held in captivity. My hands shook slightly, trying to not dwell on that time in my life, on the memories that would always exist but could be buried underneath far more positive ones.

Or in this case, far more horrific.

It was so tempting to hide from pain like this, but I refused to back away from her. From this situation. If something happened to Maize, I would rather it tear me apart, piece by piece until my soul was shredded, than for me to forget about it. Than for me to numb it out. To ignore it. I had told Maize I loved her, and I fucking meant that with every ounce of my being.

It was why she couldn't die.

Maize had told me that she loved me back, and because of that, she wasn't allowed to leave me. I wouldn't allow her to. I didn't care if I had to go into the goddamn Spirit realm to bring her back. I would. I would beg her to come back until she understood why I needed her. Why she couldn't leave me. Maize had become essential to who I was. She was the only small amount of hope in the darkness that constantly threatened to overwhelm me. To drown me.

I could smell death on her. I didn't like that shit at all. I wanted her to smell like us, not like fucking death. I fought the urge to nuzzle her throat to mark her with my scent instead, because *who the hell was I?* Fucking Cannon? I was obviously losing it.

A worried rumble broke from my throat as Maddox looked down at her, his eyes flashing with panic before glancing back at the bathtub as if willing it to fill up faster. She was like an icicle right now, frozen in my arms, and it was enough of a concern that I didn't hear the yelling around me until

Valerio's voice finally broke through the wall of silence I'd surrounded myself in, completely focused on her.

"What do you mean you just *found* her outside, Cannon?" Valerio's voice was harsh, edged in an almost manic pitch. I don't think I'd ever heard him like this. We'd been in horrible situations before, ones that could have easily killed us, and never had he lost his head. Yet here he was, twice in the past forty-eight hours, on the edge of absolutely losing his shit. I didn't blame him in the least. Not one bit.

I could feel his magic saturating the air, pulling on my own fears. I resisted the urge to snarl at him because I knew it wasn't his fault. This was just what he did. It was instinctual, just like phantomizing in and out of the Spirit realm was for me. It came more naturally than what was considered 'normal' in the Horde.

"I fell asleep in the lounge because I was so goddamn paranoid something would happen, and then I woke up feeling panicked and went to check on her." Cannon's chest produced a low, angry sound, and he snarled, "I found Philip and Charm knocked out and she was fucking gone!"

I had no idea how he was even maintaining his human form right now. I could see him shaking from tension, and his eyes were flashing black as his wolf tried to take over. My magic allowed me to see the legitimate spirit form of his wolf pushing against his skin, trying to make itself known. I just hoped he got out of here before he shifted—this bathroom was large, but it was not big enough to fit a fucking wolf, let alone an emotional one.

There was fury radiating from him, and I knew this situation would bother him nearly as much, if not more so, as it did Valerio. Neither of them liked a lack of control. Where I was used to it in some cases, never given a choice through my early life, they rejected it completely. They were furious and didn't understand how she had gotten up and left without us realizing, something that was confusing to me as well… because none of us were heavy sleepers. There was also the possibility that someone had taken her right from bed, plucked her out from between Philip and Charm, a concept that was even more terrifying.

I had to assume that was what had occurred, though, because Philip was in a state of unconsciousness, unable to be woken up, and Charm had been knocked out until Maddox had managed to shake him awake. Well, he actually hit him after a few minutes of trying and failing to wake him up, but same thing. The demon had woken up, groggy and out of sorts, deeply

confused on what was going on until he heard Cannon's panicked voice from the other room. The same voice that had immediately woken all of us and landed me in the position I was in now, concerned that the woman I was absolutely in love with was bleeding out in front of me.

There was a part of me that was concerned about Philip. I loved him as a brother, but it was grossly overshadowed by my panic for Maize. Plus, both Zed and Charm were keeping tabs on him. Zed, as mentioned, wasn't allowed in the room because almost immediately upon seeing the bloodshed, our bond had been flooded with alarm and raw bloodlust. So much so that he had left the room despite her state. Charm, on the other hand, was barely able to stand, his entire face chalky and body seemingly weak, which I had to assume was either a part of their connection or because of the pain she was experiencing.

I honestly had no idea if it was better to keep them apart or together, but considering he was only a room away, I figured it would be fine. He didn't seem like he would be much help right now, and that was what Maize needed. Fucking help.

"You're good."

I nodded to Maddox, a sharp movement, as I stood and stepped into the massive tub with her in my arms. I didn't care that I was in jeans as I sunk into the lukewarm water, her lean, frozen frame clinging to mine as she let out a sharp hiss at the temperature difference. I offered a soothing sound, knowing that the water probably felt searing against her skin, and watched as a tremble worked its way across her entire body. I had absolutely no idea how long it would take to unfreeze her and wake up fully, two factors that terrified me.

We needed to check for frostbite as well. Was that possible for her? Honestly, after tonight, I had absolutely no idea what was possible when it came to Maize. *I mean, it was like she'd never left the bed, yet she clearly had.*

Our room was fairly secure and warded, usually allowing us to tell by the magical signature who had passed through. But by all accounts, she had never left her bed, and clearly we knew that wasn't true. I mean, hell, when Cannon hadn't been able to find her, he'd tracked her blood nearly all the way to the Dark Fae border. Yet, despite consistently following her scent, he'd been caught up in a circle, unable to pinpoint her final location. As if it

was changing on him. As if someone had been purposefully keeping him away from her.

How the hell had she gotten all the way out there?

I didn't believe for a second that she'd willingly gone out there, not after being attacked at dinner earlier tonight. No. This was something else, something bigger, and my gut was warning it wasn't anything good. Maybe she had been sleepwalking? Somehow I didn't think that was the case, though.

Most of our top teams were scouting the area, the castle alerted to what had occurred despite nothing being found yet. It had been a short amount of time, but the lack of information had me feeling panicked, worried that we couldn't protect her from some looming threat. Only Maize could inspire these feelings in me. Truly. My eyes closed, and despite having been exhausted the night before, I had a feeling that I would never sleep again. Not without knowing that she wouldn't be plucked, literally, from our goddamn bed.

Maybe if she had been in your bed, it wouldn't have happened…

No. I didn't believe that. I knew how powerful Charm and Philip were. If something was able to knock them unconscious, then it probably would have done the same to me.

"Chait."

The soft murmur from the woman in my arms instantly had my complete attention. Well, not just mine—almost immediately, my three teammates went silent, seeming to completely focus in on Maize. Relief flooded our bond as she let out a soft, sleepy sound, making my entire body relax. At least her pulse was getting stronger. Small blessings from the Maker.

My gaze ran over the sight the two of us made together, and I found myself nearly shaking my head in disbelief. I had no idea what Maize saw in a scarred, fucked-up phantom hybrid from the Elven realm, but if she said she loved me, I wasn't in the business of questioning miracles. I think I would take any affection she gave me… scratch that, I absolutely knew I would. Not that I would ever be good enough for her love, but hopefully she wouldn't realize that.

We did make a very stark contrast together. My tattooed arms and darkly ringed fingers seemed to crowd her icy, perfect form possessively, as if I was trying to mark her. The only thing that was "imperfect" on Maize,

unlike myself, were scars that were burned in dark slashes across her wrists and back.

Yet even those “imperfections” could only be seen as a symbol of strength. A symbol of her surviving Mario’s bullshit. I had always thought they were beautiful, and there wasn’t a very good way to say that without sounding weird.

I loved Maize, perfect or imperfect, but there was something stunning about her imperfections. Like looking at a shattered mirror. It was still beautiful, a smooth, reflective surface, but it was a more fractured, twisted version of its reality. There was something beautiful about that concept.

Mon amour’s jet black hair was soaked against the white slip she wore, blood tinting the water around us but not inhibiting my view of her body pressed against the extremely see-through material. I knew I should have looked away, tried to cover her up, but I didn’t want to risk moving. At least, that was my excuse.

I swallowed, trying to not give into the groan working its way up my throat at the sight of her breasts pressed against the soaked material. Her nipples were hard from the cold, and my cock only seemed to harden the longer she was in my arms, clearly not getting the memo of how goddamn inappropriate that was right now. I tightened my hold on her and buried my nose in her hair, restraining myself from shooing everyone else out. It was a ridiculous protective urge because I knew she was their mate as well, but sometimes… sometimes I just wanted her to myself. To be selfish like the past year or so, where all of her attention had just been on Maddox and I.

I wanted all of Maize’s love.

I didn’t care what I had to do. I didn’t care if I had to beg… it was pathetic, but I would be willing to do so. I was far past preserving my pride. I think I had been for some time now, and tonight just made that feeling that much more present. More desperate. I needed her to realize just how important it was that she didn’t leave me. Didn’t leave us. I knew our wants weren’t her only concern, but I had to at least give it a shot, to try to explain my need, my desire for her.

Maize let out a soft hum and dug her nails into my skin slightly, my cock pulsating with need as I tried to think of *anything* but how much I wanted her. My lust for Maize had terrible timing as always, so I tried to distract myself. I mean, there was a fucking ton of shit I could focus on instead. She’d nearly died. She wasn’t healing as fast as she should. Her

familiar tattoos were gone from her frame as far as I could tell, and her wings had yet to appear despite her being injured.

How had everything gotten even more fucked up than it had been earlier at dinner? That seemed impossible. Improbable.

Didn't we get a break? A moment of peace to appreciate that she had decided to stay? No. Instead, we had a few hours of sleep before everything turned into a nightmare again. It was like fate wanted to push her away from us. It was fucking bullshit.

How did we not expect this? Predict it? We shouldn't have assumed she would be safe sleeping, even between two of us. Not after she had been attacked so openly at dinner. Now we had learned our lesson—Maize was never truly safe. Someone was trying to take her from us, and I didn't have proof of that, but it was such a strong feeling that I wasn't able to deny it.

"You should check on Charm," I urged Maddox. After a moment of staring at Maize, he nodded and stood, leaving the room. I was concerned about Charm, and the more okay Maize looked, the more worried I was about how pale and shaken he was. I had to wonder how badly their connection affected him. Maize had once said that the addiction could be horrible, unable to be inches apart, but somehow I think the mating bond aspect had altered that. That was very much the best case scenario.

Worst case? She was draining him or even killing him. I didn't want to assume that.

I should have been worried that Maize would wake up panicked and lash out with her magic. I didn't mind that, though—the risk was nothing, because if she tied me to her forever, I would be all the more thrilled about it.

Honestly, if it helped Maize, I would volunteer for that. Let her infect me with her poison. I craved to feel a bond between us, one that was stronger than what already existed, and frankly, I'd never complain about her biting into my skin. As long as she was okay with me fucking her, because there was something erotic as fuck about the idea of her drinking my blood, even to remove posion… and trust me, I had absolutely never felt that way before.

"Cannon! Valerio!" Zed bit out, his voice strained and filled with worry. "Can you please go talk to the fucking team leads? They're in the lounge."

Immediately, both men walked out of the room, leaving me alone with Maize as the door closed behind them. Silence permeated the room, yet I

could still hear the ringing in my ears from Cannon's panic about her being injured, pulling us from our deep sleep. I had never imagined Cannon being dramatic, but his 'injured' claim had been the understatement of the century.

I moved my eyes to the water spilling over the side of the tub, again and again, draining and refilling with fresh water to remove the blood and dirt. It was a marble monstrosity. This entire fucking room was, and I realized that Charm was a bit of a princess when it came to shit like this. It shouldn't have surprised me at all. I wasn't going to complain, though—it was warming her, and her pulse under my fingers was growing stronger. I knew when she woke she would be in a lot of pain, so I hoped she continued to rest until she had the strength to handle that. And the questioning to follow. And our reactions to what occurred… because no one was okay with any of this. I just hoped to hang onto some level of normality around her so that I didn't scare her off.

Suddenly, the door opened, and Maddox walked back in before closing it once again, blocking out the loud and angry conversation going on in the main lounge. I watched my brother cautiously as he slid against the vanity cabinet onto the bloodstained floor, his jaw clenched as he offered me a strained look.

Yeah, this was going to be a problem. This was going to be a tipping point for Maddox, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop that.

I loved Maddox. He was my best friend and my brother, but his fractured psyche was no longer up for debate, and I had sort of just been waiting for him to finally give into it. I mean, the man kept it under a thin guise of eerie calm, specifically around Maize, while trying to appear distant and indifferent to those around him. But that didn't work very well when he lost his shit on the SE guards and killed them unapologetically after they'd sparred with her and left marks on her skin. I suppose, to be fair, he didn't kill all of them… but a large number of them did seem to go missing or absent from duty.

It was this extreme reaction that had forced him to keep a distance from her for so long. All of his control slipped away with her, and I absolutely knew that this was going to be the pebble that shattered that thin glass barrier. I could see it cracking, and I prayed that Maize was going to be able to handle that. Handle him.

Not that he would hurt her, but… I just wasn't positive what he would do.

"How did we not feel her leave?" Maddox snarled quietly as he ran a hand over his face, looking as distressed as I felt.

"Can't you get in her head?" I asked softly. I wish I could tell you I felt bad about the invasion of privacy… but not after tonight. I was far more invested in figuring out how any of this had happened.

None of it made sense, and I knew instinctively that Maize wasn't to blame for any of this, even if I didn't have the proof to back that up. She may want to hit Charm over the head, but I knew she would never hurt Philip. I saw the way she handled his vulnerability that covered up his psychotic temper and not so slight sadistic streak. *No, that concept didn't mesh with me.*

I nearly laughed at how she handled Philip. I was glad she saw Charm's real side, because I was hoping it would make it easier to accept Philip's real side. Not the charming one—although I had no doubt he felt that way towards her—but his intentions that were anything but innocent.

I knew how he watched her, and while none of us had had anything remotely considered a relationship in years, I had heard rumors about what he was into. Well, not rumors as much as Maddox's confirmation from his ability to traverse thoughts that ran through our team's bond. He tried to respect privacy, but sometimes… well, sometimes shit was super loud, and Philip wasn't quiet about how obsessive he was over Maize. I honestly had mixed feelings on her being alone with him for the time being, not because I thought he would hurt her, but because I didn't want to risk scaring her off.

Philip very much had the potential to do that.

Then again, was I much better? I wasn't sure I was.

After a minute or so, Maddox spoke, clearly having tried to make that psychic connection with her. "No, I can't. She's warded herself completely off. I can't get shit without pushing her or Philip, and I don't think that's a great idea right now."

I could see how tempted he was, despite the serious consequences it could have. I wasn't positive that I would have had nearly as much restraint.

"It could be David," I commented, thinking about dinner and the dark, unnatural magic that he had managed to use on her. How he had managed to

almost fucking kill her. The rage associated with his name had my vision turning spotty as I tried to remind myself that Charm had saved her.

My lips tilted up as I remembered the vision of her sharp teeth appearing and her eyes darkening. It was fucking glorious, and I didn't think there was anything more beautiful than Maize's true fae form, sharp teeth and extended claw-like nails included. I wanted to feel those nails digging into my skin as she let me slam into her tight heat. Although, we would probably need to save that for a time when she had more energy and was healed, because I knew once I dove into Maize, I would probably not let her leave the bed for a really fucking long time.

I wasn't going to apologize about it, either.

My fingers brushed through her hair, sighing in relief that the bleeding seemed to have stopped, but worrying about how much damage an injury like that would have done to her. I couldn't imagine how bad it had been originally, and it just further solidified the fact that someone had put her out there to hurt her. Someone had taken her out in the middle of the fucking Horde forest to let her freeze and bleed out from head trauma.

Someone had hurt mon amour. *Someone was going to die for that.*

I didn't enjoy killing, but I also didn't reject it. I had the ability to pull someone's life force from them, not softly like a necromancer or like a slow draining process. No, I could literally just rip someone's fucking life force out and toss it into the Spirit realm. I honestly had no idea where my magic came from, but considering my parents had sold me off at age five, I would assume their bed partners weren't well vetted. I could be a fucking descendant of Hades himself and I would absolutely never know. I was completely okay with that concept, for the record.

Gently, I poured warm water over her shoulder as she shivered, clutching me tighter. Maddox increased the temperature slightly and answered my comment. "There has been no sign of him on Academy grounds since dinner, and his uncle is still in questioning… so unless someone hid him and he attacked again, it's unlikely."

"Who knows what type of friends that motherfucker has," I muttered disdainfully. "He had someone trash Maize's room, presumably. What about those kids?"

Maddox chuckled softly. "Containment. A solid week, and then they may be let out, but not until then."

The fact that David and his friends had a connection through his uncle to SE was a problem to begin with. No that it wasn't allowed, but there was such a high amount of corruption within the kingdom's military, and while I knew the Royal Guard were working to erase it, it was difficult to do so on such a grand government scale like that. There was a pecking order that had been ingrained in their brains, and anyone who had a bit of power believed that they had the right to make decisions. Even if it wasn't their fucking job to do so. Especially when it wasn't their job to do so, it seemed.

The woman in my arms shifted slightly, my eyes trailing the way her icy skin was now flushing in color, blood washing away to reveal dark bruising on her biceps, as if someone had dragged her that way. I let out a small snarl at the concept of anyone touching her like that. My lips pressed against her temple as she let out a soft, content sigh that had my heart jumping with a surge of relief.

She was going to be okay. I just needed to continue to remind myself of that.

When the door opened, I expected Valerio, but instead Charm made an appearance, shutting the door and joining Maddox on the floor. His eyes ran over Maize, a vulnerable, worried expression flashing across his face. It was one I hadn't seen in years, and I felt my chest squeeze in sympathy, knowing that Charm was terrible at handling shit like this. I was surprised he'd yet to lash out. Instead, he just looked sort of… lost.

"Is she going to be okay?" Charm asked roughly, his eyes darkening to almost black. It made him look even more pale, and Maddox offered him a concerned look, probably feeling the change in his magic signature. Charm's normally vibrant magic felt restrained and weaker.

He continued, "I tried to stay in the other room, but she wasn't lying. It's like a fucking itch under my skin. When we moved Philip to the other bedroom, it became too much, and I… I had to be close to her again."

Jealousy surged through me at the obvious primal connection the two of them had, and I found myself wishing that it was me that she'd marked. Which was absolutely ridiculous since he hadn't asked for it but instead saved her life. Still, it didn't remove the desire. My eyes flashed down to the small star outline on her collarbone, making me wonder if each of our mating bonds would leave a mark on her. I hoped so.

If she accepted the mating bond… it was almost inevitable she'd mark us. Even if by accident. I had never wanted a mark on my skin so bad, and

I’d never wanted to mark someone like I did with Maize. It wasn’t a healthy reaction, but it was unavoidable.

“Yeah, she’ll be okay,” I said in response to his first comment as she nuzzled into my chest slightly, her breathing a bit uneven still. “Are *you* going to be alright? You look like shit, man.”

Charm nodded sharply, not offering his normal sarcastic remark, making me even more concerned as he just continued to stare at her. My fingers brushed over her face, rubbing a thumb over her nose as it began to turn pink and her frozen lashes began to thaw. After another five minutes, I felt her magic finally begin to make an appearance. I had no idea where it had come from, but the cool sensation against my skin was familiar. Maddox sat up, clearly sensing it as well.

Charm jumped like something had shocked him, his head hitting the cabinet behind him as a crash like breaking glass sounded from the other room. I arched a brow as both men stood and went towards the door, closing it to keep the steam trapped in the bathroom. Ten bucks that Philip had just woken up. I watched Maize expectantly as her back twitched, almost as if moving along with her wings that were still hidden, before her lashes finally opened.

Maker. She was perfect.

“Chait?” Maize asked softly as I cupped her jaw gently, her voice raspy and exhausted. Diamond-like eyes fluttered up to me, a flush invading her face, affection turning them from a pale blue-silver to a rich sapphire that had me nearly groaning. I couldn’t tell if she fully realized that she was awake, because her attention seemed hazy at best, her body stretching against mine. Maker. The woman was unfairly stunning. My heart actually hurt with how beautiful she was.

Nothing compared to the relief I felt at seeing her eyes open. Nothing in the world.

“*Mon amour*,” I mumbled in greeting as my fingers brushed over her cheek, causing her to nuzzle against my chest. I could see a flush invading the rest of her body, and this wicked threat of energy began to grow from her magic, a pulling sensation that I was used to, except that this one was tainted with a heady sexual undertone. One that had an unabated rumble breaking from my throat at the way she squirmed against me.

As if she didn’t notice, her eyes gazed around the massive tub before shakily looking down at our submerged bodies, my arms tightening around

her not only securely but possessively. I didn't want her to leave me. Even if it was by a few inches. I also could see the panic and reality start to sink in as her body went completely still, her face filling with fear as her pulse went haywire. Immediately, my magic wrapped around her, trying to send soothing energy over her skin as my lips brushed against her temple. Maize let out a puff of breath as she seemed to cling to me.

"Breathe, Maize," I demanded in a soft but persuasive voice. "You are completely safe. I promise. I've got you."

She exhaled and nodded hesitantly, tightening her grip on me. It made my heart surge with pride, knowing that her instinct was probably to push me away until she figured out what was going on, to protect herself by distancing. Instead, she clung to me as if I was providing an anchor for her. Maker, I hoped I was doing something goddamn helpful… besides staring at her half-naked body.

As enjoyable as that was, I had a feeling it wasn't included in the 'helpful' category.

"Why am I in a tub?" she rasped out. I was surprised her magic had yet to lash out, but also thankful that she'd recognized my magic enough to not feel threatened.

Either that or she was so incredibly weak that even that defense had yet to push forward. I mean, where the hell were her wings? Maize without her magic, despite her distrust of it, was an odd thing. It was such a fundamental part of her, and I knew that if I ever lost my magic it would make me feel absolutely off balance. Disoriented.

"I promise I'll explain soon," I soothed while tilting her jaw up. "First I need you to tell me exactly how you're feeling. Can you feel all of your fingers and toes? Anything numb?" I felt far more panic and concern than my voice was portraying, and honestly, I was somewhat impressed by my ability to keep my shit together.

After a moment, she let out a small hum and frowned. "Yes. I can feel everything. Fuck, this water is really hot, though."

"It's a little warmer than lukewarm. You were a fucking icicle when Cannon found you," I admitted and brushed her wet hair from her face. "Do you want to get out?"

As if remembering something, her fingers shakily made their way to her matted, blood-covered hair as she gently pressed on the bandages, whimpering. Tears filled her eyes, belying her empty expression, and

anxiety coursed through the bond that our magic attempted to make. I knew without a doubt that when we completed this mating bond, I would feel her emotions to an acute and dangerous extent. If it hurt like this now, I couldn't imagine what it would feel like then. I was actually surprised Charm wasn't in here yet.

"I need you to tell me what happened, Maize," I urged gently.

Blinking up at me, her eyes took on that hazy glaze. "I have no idea."

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CHAPTER 2

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MAIZE

Hunger. My throat was dry, and starvation wrecked through me at the same extreme as the electric pain that caused my body to scream in agony. I had never felt so weak and so depleted in my entire life. It was like when my father used to drain me and lock me away from everyone, keeping me from healing. Keeping me from feeding off their essence. Somehow this was worse. It was like I'd been pulled from the brink of death and I was now surviving on a small spark of energy that was quickly dwindling in the center of my chest.

I was going to die.

A strangled sound broke from my throat as Chait's magic wrapped around me. I held his gaze, my fangs throbbing as I tried to resist the urge to crawl up his body and feed on his energy. Resist the urge to hurt him to strengthen myself. I didn't think I had the energy to move up his body, let alone that. But fuck did I crave it. I craved him.

I had always fed off others' energies, but this was different. This was an acute hunger that had my mouth watering as my eyes trailed to where his pulse quickened under my gaze, a predatory instinct pulling up from my chest as my vision blurred slightly. A barely contained scream was muffled by Chait's chest as an electric shock of pain caused me to convulse.

Chait was speaking, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I couldn't feel anything. My body was trying so hard to heal itself and failing horribly, my control slipping as all my energy was put towards staying alive. I was so, so cold, and I found myself wanting to bury my fingers inside the warm muscular chest underneath me, needing something to ground me to this moment.

“*Mon amour*, what is going on?” Chait demanded sharply, cupping my jaw as I looked up at him. My tongue ran over my sharpened fangs as his eyes flashed to them, confusion morphing into something else as blood began to pump loudly in my ears. Why wasn’t I pulling energy like normal? It didn’t make any sense.

A small whine of pain broke from my throat as my magic urged me to bite into his flesh, to feed directly from the source of his magic. I tried to pull away, but his grip only tightened as he pulled me up his body, my entire body shuddering with the pain that seemed to shock my system.

“You have to let me go,” I choked out. “I’m not pulling magic like normal, Chait. I’m going to end up feeding from you.” When the fuck had that become a thing? I had a feeling it was because my magic was too weak to do anything but try to heal me… but I had no idea. Bloodlust slammed into me once again as I dug my nails into him, contradicting my urgency to move away.

A low feral noise broke from his throat as I broke skin, the scent of smoky blood and magic filling the space as I was pulled flush with him in a straddle, the room going dizzy around me. I braced myself against him as a secondary and equally as strong hunger rushed over me, heat exploding from my center as my skin broke out into shivers. I rocked against his hard, jean-covered length as my hands shakily ran across the injury on his chest. I barely resisted the urge to lick my fingers, not knowing what that would ignite.

“Chait,” I begged softly, knowing I was reaching my breaking point, “you have to let me go. I don’t trust myself to not hurt you—”

A pair of soft, firm lips pressed against mine as a groan rumbled from his throat, the sound causing a trembling sensation to roll over me. Almost as if it had been waiting, my magic latched onto him, pulling from the sexual energy rolling between us as my clit pulsed needily, my entire frame shaking. I couldn’t stop myself from dipping my nails into his tattooed chest even more, a delicious, guttural sound breaking from his throat that had my magic tightening its hold on his as they continued a dark and dangerous dance.

“I am not scared of your magic,” Chait promised in a purr against my lips.

“I am though,” I attempted, exhausted and coursing with hunger for him, his energy warming inside of me. I was going to snap. My gaze fell

down to his neck, and I found my lips pressed against his jaw as I nearly fucking climaxed at only the thought of sinking my teeth into his flesh, knowing that he would taste absolutely amazing. I'd never wanted to taste someone's blood as badly as I wanted his.

It would heal me. He would heal me. Chait had the ability to bring me out of this state, and I knew he would survive it. My consciousness pushed forward, rebelling against the notion of trapping the man we loved in such a dangerous situation. There was already one thread connected to me, and I couldn't justify doing that to someone else.

But my magic disagreed, wanting to mark him and feed from him. *He was ours.* But not to hurt. Not to poison. Tears of frustration pooled in my gaze as Chait pulled back, cupping my jaw and forcing me to focus on him.

"What do you need, Maize? What does your magic need?" he asked intuitively as his fuschia eyes darkened to a near plum color, the room seeming to darken on the edges as his magic wrapped around mine, taking dominance. I was shocked when we let him, my body pressing forward against him as his hand slid to the back of my neck and held firmly so that I was completely focused on him.

"It's hungry," I admitted as a tear streaked down my face. "I feed off those around me, but I'm so… I just can't, my magic isn't strong enough. I need you to leave the room, Chait, because I'm going to hurt you. I'm going to end up feeding off you and marking you—"

"I will never leave you," he said firmly, his other hand tightened on my waist, making me whimper at the feel of his firm grasp.

"Chait." I tried to make my voice sound firm, but instead it came out needy, my eyes fluttering shut as a smoky, sweet scent filled the space, lulling me into a state of relaxation. A near moan broke from my throat as I felt the ghost of his lips brush against my neck, causing me to give into his touch completely, my body and mind far too weak to fight something that felt so natural.

I needed him. His desire. His essence. His magic. I could barely focus on anything but the touch of his hands on my skin and his lips brushing and caressing me. The man seemed to be controlling the entire space, and there was a small edge of predatory dominance from his magic that I hadn't expected but found completely erotic. My entire body became a needy puddle.

My hips rolled forward as his cock pulsed at the separation between us, making me want to take him out to feel how hard he would be in my hand. A moan left my lips as desire filtered over the pain like a medical treatment, causing me to breathe in relief before I felt the wave of pure lust rocketing through me. I had no idea how to ask him for what I needed. How to ask him to help fix me. Help this hunger for him. For his touch. For his blood. I was going to hurt him, and I had a feeling he was going to let me.

“Fuck,” he hissed, his tone almost warning. I felt his pulse increase, my hands moving up his tattooed chest to his shoulders. My nails were drawing blood as his hands slid down to my waist and gripped me in a bruising grasp. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me with a level of intensity I hadn’t expected. Everything swam as my throat produced another needy sound.

“Help,” I begged. With Valerio, he had just taken what he had wanted, and I’d fucking loved it. But Chait wouldn’t do the same. He would make me ask. I knew that, and I was past asking—I was at the point of begging.

“Tell me what you need.” His voice was filled with a soothing magic that had me wanting to give him exactly what he was asking for.

“I don’t know.” More tears leaked from my face as my skin flushed. “You. I just need you. Please, Chait.”

“You’re injured.” A low groan broke from his throat as if remembering himself. “I’ll make you feel better, Maize, but you have to promise to do exactly what I say. Promise me.”

It was a demand, hard and unyielding, a side of Chait I’d never seen before. I absolutely loved it. I would probably tell him that once I could see straight again.

“Yes,” I agreed immediately, a gasp of pleasure breaking from my lips as hands gently pulled back my hair from my neck, making my eyes widen. I almost immediately turned to see who was behind me, but the man kept me captured against him, his smile turning nearly wicked.

“Do not look away from me,” he ordered. I nodded slowly, watching as his eyes turned into almost spirals of black and pink, making me feel dizzy and high.

“What is that?” I asked on a moan as ghost-like fingers brushed across my shoulders, causing shivers to break out in both fear and pleasure. They felt so good and so wrong at the same time.

“Just my magic, *mon amour*,” he explained softly, nipping at my neck. I jumped slightly, his name falling from my lips. A moan broke from me as another pair of phantom hands gently ran up my thighs, causing me to draw blood again in frustration, my eyes flickering to the crimson droplets as Chait let out a low growl.

I found myself surging forward and running my tongue across the wound, his flavor exploding across my tongue. A surge of energy began to flow through me, completely connecting us emotionally, physically, and through our magic. A shudder wracked his frame as I trailed my lips up his neck and inhaled, his smoky blood causing my mouth to water again.

“Do it,” he demanded softly. My body tightened painfully at his command, my magic already jumping up and through me like pressure in a gas chamber. I knew this was a dangerous game, but I was nearly panting with need, and when Chait’s grip grew hard on my hair, the sting from my injury causing my clit to pulse, I gave into it. I gave into the trap of need he’d set, willingly entangling myself further.

My teeth sliced through his skin, easily, like it had with Charm. This time, though, I wasn’t pulling out poison, I was feeding on his energy, and I knew I was going to be the one left feeling addicted and needy afterwards. His blood was giving me life, and I didn’t realize that I was essentially humping the fucking man until his hands slid to my ass and paused my movements, his chest heaving and entire body tense with strangled tension.

“I can smell how fucking wet you are,” he growled, my legs spreading almost instinctively as I tried to find any level of friction to get this need to go away. I found my eyes fluttering shut as I licked the wound, pulling back from it as a moan of need broke out of my lips. Fuck, he tasted amazing.

“Chait,” I nearly whined, and it was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

His lips seared mine in a hot, dangerous kiss as the taste of his blood exploded between us, the room spinning as he dipped me back slightly, as I turned into putty in his arms. His scent, his magic, *he* was everywhere, and an overwhelming sense of love underscored it all, making me feel like it was an unstoppable disaster waiting to occur. There wasn’t a damn thing I could do.

My legs tightened as his rough hands slid to push my slip up, the scarred texture of his fingers feeling good as they ran through my wet heat. I moaned, trying to not move as he teased me, knowing he would only

make me wait longer. I could feel his eyes on my face, and when I fully looked up to him, a hunger that I'd never seen before was shining there, making me feel almost euphoric.

"Patience," he demanded knowingly as phantom fingers brushed my ribs and up my breasts. I cried out as they pulled hard on my nipples, teasing them as I looked down to find the soaked fabric moving of its own accord. The trippy display only turned me on more, because holy fuck this was insane.

"Do you need to come, Maize? Do you want me to make this pretty little pussy come on my fingers?" he demanded and nipped my jaw hard when I didn't answer at first, his thumb circling my clit. I whimpered a 'yes' as he sunk a finger, then a second, inside of me, the invasion causing me to shudder in relief.

This man knew my body way too well. *Holy shit.*

His low growl at the moan that broke from my throat had me surging forward to press to his lips again. He took my mouth in a hard, rough kiss that had my magic surging, and I bit down on his lip in frustration, making him snarl.

"Bad Maize." He chuckled, his voice rough and on edge, his blood dancing on my tongue. My eyes rolled back as he pumped his fingers, causing the walls of my control to shake. I knew if I was stronger I would have been able to hold it, but I could feel my body and magic pushing past my normal barriers. I needed to warn him, but all that came out was incoherent sounds of pleasure.

"Fuck, you are so tight," he inhaled sharply while pumping two fingers in and out of me, causing me to rock against his hand.

"We shouldn't," I whimpered, opening my eyes. "My magic—"

His lips pressed against mine again, demanding my climax as everything began to tighten and build with pressure. Not just my body, but my magic. I could feel it growing from feeding on him, my body healing itself while also soaking in the pleasure he afforded us. I was so goddamn worried about hurting him, but his control over my entire body seemed to supercede my ability to warn him. I was so fucking weak and turned on that all I wanted to do was let him take care of me. Let him take care of the pain I felt. Let him fix me.

"Let go."

His thumb continued circling the hard bundle of nerves that had my thighs shaking as his demand echoed through the space. I felt like a fucking animal in heat, the hormones clouding my brain enough that I felt high. My consciousness was screaming at me to warn him. To protect the man I loved. Everything else was lulling me into a hot, lust-filled cocoon, my magic desperately wanting to feed and mark him.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I breathed out.

“Maize!” he growled, making me look him right in the eyes. I nearly climaxed at the hunger, possession, and darkness there. “I *want* to feel your magic mark me. I want you to feed on me. More than anything, I want you to fucking come on my fingers.”

I gasped as he bit down hard on my shoulder, not breaking skin but very much leaving a mark. A warning. One that I couldn’t ignore.

My climax built as everything turned hazy, making his words almost feel as though they were echoing in my head. I could feel the explosion that was about to absolutely rock my body and possibly the space around us.

“I fucking love you,” Chait whispered against my skin. Those words undid me. My magic took over and I gave into it, the pleasure hitting an all-time high.

I was falling over then, into the dark abyss, and there was absolutely no way to stop it. My magic erupted around me, my wings breaking from my back as electric shocks crawled against our skin in pink, blue, and purple patterns. I let out a moan of relief as a feral sound broke from Chait, going from pleasured to almost strangled.

That was when realization hit me.

Immediately, my gaze snapped to his, and panic surged through me, feeling far more myself than before. Fuck. Fuckity fuck. Chait offered me a lazy, pleased smile, his skin paling as he leaned against the tile wall of the tub, his breathing rough despite looking thrilled.

“Fuck!” I exclaimed, feeling like I’d snorted a line of goddamn pixie dust. I felt high, and I offered the man a punishing yet love-filled kiss before I buried my teeth back into his neck, this time for a much different reason. His groan filled the room as he shifted his hips, his cock pressing against me as his magic began to feed back into mine on a loop.

It was happening again.

I was going to kick his fucking ass. The mating bond was forming, and as I drew the poison from his body, I found relief and contentment surging

through me. He'd literally saved my life, and I'd fucking posioned him… yet I was happy? Happy because I could feel a burning sensation on my collarbone and knew that I'd somehow marked him. His magic turned nearly suffocating around me as I inhaled the smoky drug-like flavor, pulling away from his neck as everything brightened to neon around us.

Holy fuck.

My magic began to heal my body fully as I laid slumped against a very vibrant Chait, his skin jumping with power as he held me firmly and possessively against him. I could feel how strong both of us were, and I had to wonder how something that had so many benefits could be bad. My brow dipped as memories from the forest began to trickle in, paired with questions.

Where were my familiars?

How had I gotten out there?

A shiver went over me as I remembered the frozen pain of waking in the forest, the confusion of still not understanding how I got there, the memory of a very obvious block… as if someone had removed it, and the dark-eyed woman who had warned me that someone had tried to kill me. I groaned in frustration as I finally pulled away, finding Chait's cocky and sated smile in place as he watched me through hooded eyes.

A low rumble broke from his throat when my fingers brushed against the small, skeletal butterfly that now rested on his neck. Then my eyes followed his to find a small outlined moon on my other collarbone, opposite the star. His smile grew as he brushed his lips against it, causing me to let out a pleasured sigh.

"Holy hell," I mumbled. I had so many thoughts running through my head. Honestly, one of them was how I hadn't realized just how awesome his phantom form could be… I mean, I'd just never considered all the possibilities.

Then the guilt hit.

As if knowing, Chait's eyes darkened, and his voice was dark. "Don't you dare apologize, Maize. I can see it right fucking there, so don't bother."

"I poisoned you," I choked out in horror, tears welling in my eyes. *How the fuck was he not seeing the problem here? I was a leech! I was a goddamn parasite. Even worse, what if I hadn't been able to save him? What if the energy I'd taken from him had made the poison work faster—*

“You took care of yourself, which is what I told you to do,” he snarled. Then his smile grew. “Well, I guess I took care of you, but same thing. You were fucking knocking on death’s door, Maize. It’s over. It happened. You won’t see me complaining about being bonded to you forever.”

My mouth dropped open as amusement flashed through my chest—unwelcomed, of course.

“You wanted me to mark you?” Poison you. Bind you. Holy fuck, this man was absolutely insane. Honestly, my black heart was squeezing at the concept of him wanting to spend forever with me.

“Never wanted anything more, *mon amour.*”

“Why?”

He blinked as if confused by my question. “Because I love you.”

I nibbled my lip gently. “I love you too… are you sure, Chait? I mean, we can’t do anything to change it, but…”

My eyes moved down to his new mating mark, a token of my possessive magic. I couldn’t help the surge of happiness that went through me upon seeing it. I knew he was my mate, but somehow it made me feel far better to see it, visually.

Which reminded me… where was Charm? I missed the bastard.

“I love your mark on me,” he admitted, his voice suddenly rough.

A blush hit my cheeks as my vulnerability probably showed on my face. “I love it there… I just feel bad. I was in so much pain and so hungry, and you felt so amazing inside of—”

Chait growled, melding our lips together as he nipped my lip dangerously. “If you say ‘inside of me,’ I am going to be inside of you in a fucking second or less. I can’t handle that.”

“Okay,” I whispered shakily.

A moment of silence, filled with comfort and affection, passed as he rested his forehead against my own. I winced in anticipation as he lifted a hand to the bandages around my head but breathed out as I realized that the injury felt mostly healed. Thank fuck.

“How does it feel?” Chait asked, his voice filled with concern.

“Much better,” I admitted as he helped me unwrap the bandages. I let out a sigh of relief when my hand met the back of my healed head, the matted blood unavoidable in my hair but much better than that terrible injury. A shiver went through me, both in memory and at the fact that my

healing was direct proof that I'd literally fed off Chait. I swallowed down an apology, and luckily, the door opened before I could say anything more.

Instantly, the room was flooded with the connection that I'd been craving and siphoning energy from just to stay alive. Something I hadn't fully realized until seeing him… Charm had been keeping me alive, even if it had been by a trickle.

"Charm," I greeted, my voice soft as vibrant eyes met mine.

Almost instantly, relief flooded our bond, and I was caught off guard, my eyes truly taking in the two of them and just how goddamn vibrant they were. A flush invaded my cheeks as I swallowed nervously, trying to not feel overwhelmed. For the record, I clearly didn't have a type, because these men were literally day and night from one another. All of them were so drastically different, but equally as intense and stunning.

I'd been attracted to Chait from the first day I'd met him, and somehow he seemed to impossibly get hotter every time I saw him. Something that seemed rather unfair, if you really thought about it.

Currently, his dark hair, a shock of curls on top with short, almost shaved sides, was wet, making the fuschia wave-like streaks look more purple than anything. The man appeared to have magic constantly running over his skin, and I knew that wasn't just due to me—it was just who Chait was. His frame relaxed and spread out, watching me with a hungry look as I resisted the urge to reach out and touch him again, his hazy magic almost making him seem unreal. Especially with those fuschia eyes.

Although, despite it being different, everything about Chait seemed to fit the lazy, sensual man that I was finding had a dominant streak when it came to the two of us alone. I didn't mind that in the goddamn least, and I nearly scowled as I realized that unlike his other piercings, his lip one was out. I would have loved to feel that against my skin. Or feel his rough, golden, tattooed hands against my hips again as I smoothed my fingers through his hair, teasing him as much as he could tease me. Man, this guy was one hundred percent dangerous, and even now, in just dark jeans, in a tub, he looked like some goddamn pierced and tattooed warrior. *Because he literally was.* I tried to ignore the surge of hunger I felt for him once again, knowing that now was so not the time for that. He was just so addictive to look at, and I swear, the man's scent had been embedded into my subconscious. Just like how I wanted to memorize every muscular divet of his frame and run my tongue along it.

Holy crap, I needed to stop.

His smile grew as he flashed me a dangerous smile, my eyes running over his gorgeous face and the way his ears pointed just a bit more than anyone else I knew. I think that his scars and the things he didn't like about himself were sometimes my favorite.

I nibbled my lips, wondering what he would do if I started messing with his magic again, if I pulled on it through our bond. I mean, the man was ridiculously powerful. He had death magic, but it was far more than that—he could literally turn into a ghost, phasing in and out of reality, and it seemed that his magic had some more… erotic uses as well.

"Maize," Chait rumbled slightly as I let out a sharp exhale and snapped my head away from him, trying to not feel a surge of happiness that he was mine. That he was my mate.

"Did you mark him?" Charm's voice filled the space as I met his gaze.

Ah fuck. Yeah, this was going to take some explanation.

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CHAPTER 3

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MAIZE

I couldn’t lie, I feared judgement from Charm a bit. The man constantly pushed me, and I didn’t want him thinking I was weak, let alone hurting his brother, my own mate. I also didn’t want to ruin the small little bout of peace we’d found after he’d saved my life tonight. So instead of answering, I let my gaze draw up the demon, a small noise breaking from my throat at the intensity there. Our connection was vibrating with energy, and as he crouched at the side of the tub, I examined his expression hesitantly, worried about his reaction. What I found surprised me a bit.

There was surprise, lust, and even a small amount of jealousy. No anger, though. No disappointment. I found my body relaxing as warmth filtered in through his gaze, concern replaced by surprise as he realized, no doubt, how tense I’d been about his reaction.

“I woke up… hungry,” I murmured, feeling a flush of embarrassment, not positive if that was the right word. Luckily, Chait’s magic was brushing against me in a soothing way as our bond hummed with contentment, so it made me feel better. It was difficult because I liked being able to read their emotions, especially since I usually sucked at it, but it also gave them direct access to mine. That… that made me a bit nervous.

Charm let out a soft hum of understanding, examining my face before gripping my jaw in one hand and leaning forward to press a kiss to my lips. Instantly, the connection between us flared to life and my wings twitched, threatening to release again as my hands gripped his forearms. Although whether it was to push or pull him away, I wasn’t sure. But I felt out of breath as he pulled away, his dandelion eyes flashing a deep gold before his lips pressed up in amusement.

I jumped as Chait's fingers ran up my spine, making me realize I was caught between the two of them, pressed against the edge of the tub. My body flashed with heat and I nearly groaned, knowing they could feel the lust that rolled over me. Fuck. This was going to be impossible to hide.

"I think I'm jealous," Charm admitted, his voice edged in a growl. "I can smell you on him. Did he make you come, birdy?"

Oh my Maker. Nope. We needed to go back to when Charm wasn't dirty talking. I was not prepared for that.

I shivered as he nipped my ear when I didn't respond.

"You should be jealous." Chait grinned antagonistically, his lips pressing to my shoulder as Charm turned my head back towards him. The man's words still reached me, though. "She comes so fucking pretty."

"I bet she does," my demon snarled.

Mine? Oh man, this was bad.

I didn't have a chance to overthink it, though, because Charm seared our lips together, his golden hair suddenly between my fingers as I gripped him closer. His warm skin, nearly a true gold, broke out into shivers as I ran my fingers down his neck, brushing the mark I'd left on him. Holy hell, there was something liberating about knowing I couldn't hurt him.

I tried to not let my fingers explore further down his massive, muscular frame, but his sweet sugar and sunshine scent was like a toxic pull. The man looked like a fucking sun god and smelled as good as the sunflower shade of his eyes. How someone so dangerous could look so appealing was still a mystery. He honestly looked angelic, even down to the gold gauges that covered each ear and the golden light that seemed to surround him. But this demon had a darkness to him, and as I pulled back, that predatory sharpness made itself known as he pulled me back to his lips in a claiming kiss. My fingers itched to memorize every detail of him, something I had no right doing because our situation was so delicate, but it didn't stop the urge. When he finally let me pull back, I was breathing fast. I let him see my desires, not bothering to stop the imagery in my head.

Mostly about being between the two of them.

Not that I could admit that out loud. His low growl had Chait pausing from where he was nipping at my neck. I blushed, Charm's smile growing wicked as he flashed me dimples that didn't match his cocky grin.

"Is that what you want, Maize?" he demanded.

I didn't think I had the ability to answer that in a real sentence.

“What does she want?” Chait asked. My head fell to the side as I exposed my neck, his bite a bit more sharp this time as I felt my eyes flutter shut. Honestly, being between the two of them—hell, any of my mates—almost had me feeling high. This had to be a magic thing, because no man should have the ability to turn me into goddamn putty like this. I was a complete mess.

Honestly, physical intimacy was unsurprisingly always difficult for me, in any shape or form. Not only had I drained and poisoned the first man I’d slept with, killing him almost instantly, but I’d also bonded a young boy to my magic when I was younger, not understanding the addictive effects. He also died. So yeah, you could say I was intimidated by my own capabilities, and honestly? This bond, this connection, was softening the blow of those insecurities. Those fears.

I wouldn’t hurt them. I literally *couldn’t* hurt them. I didn’t know if I was ready to take it past this point, because obviously, I had to assume that would bring back some very unwanted memories… but it didn’t remove the desire to connect in such a basic, primal way. Didn’t remove the desire to have them bend me over and fuck me hard enough that every ounce of those memories was completely removed from my mind.

A near moan left my throat at that concept, but before Charm could expose my ever-growing fantasy, a sound of angry shouting came from outside, making me freeze. Ice trickled up my spine as I shrunk back, eyeing the door cautiously. I didn’t recognize the voice, and that made me feel… not scared, per se, but cautious.

Almost immediately, Chait got up and out of the tub, pressing his lips to mine in a demanding kiss before leaving the room, dripping water as he closed the door.

I breathed out as the voices lowered in the other room, my gaze moving back to Charm, his sunshine-sweet scent making my face warm.

“Why the hell did you leave the dorms?” The growl in his voice had me nearly smiling, and I resisted the urge to hit him upside the head at his grumpiness. Instead, I tried a softer tactic, my fingers brushing his jaw as I tilted my head.

“Charm, do you think I willingly left the dorms? On purpose?”

Vulnerability flashed behind his gaze as he searched my face before grunting, “No, and that scares me a fuck ton more, birdy.”

I loved that nickname.

I nodded and continued to run my fingers along his jaw as he leaned into my hand. “The last thing I remember is falling asleep… and then waking up alone and bleeding somewhere in the cold.”

“With a horrible head injury,” he snarled, and I nodded. I shivered slightly as he leaned forward to test the bathwater, frowning as he reached over to increase the temperature. I sighed as the water recycled through and began to heat up, my head resting on the edge as he watched me softly, his fingers running through my hair as we sat in peaceful silence.

I honestly didn’t know what to say to him. We couldn’t fix this if I couldn’t remember, and I wasn’t positive I had enough energy to leave the tub right now. I also wasn’t positive that I was bold enough to stand up in front of him, my slip completely see-through over my frame.

“I should probably wash the blood out of my hair,” I pointed out, smiling slightly as he nodded immediately. Yeah, I had a feeling that he was uncomfortable with the blood, but I was surprised he hadn’t said anything yet. Then again, I honestly didn’t know how to predict what Charm would do next. He was somewhat of a mystery to me.

“Turn around and lean forward slightly,” Charm commanded. I offered him an arched brow, curious what he wanted to do. His ears heated as he maintained eye contact, my smile growing as I scooted forward and faced the large tub I was soaking in.

I found myself pleasantly surprised as Charm, of all people, began taking care of me, using a small cup to rinse my hair. I winced at his fingers brushing the back of my skull. It didn’t hurt, but the phantom pain was still there. Luckily, I was able to relax fully by the time he was done washing each lock of my hair and then putting some conditioner in it. His attention to each strand was enough to make my eyes water, but I tried to not overthink it too much.

He was just being nice.

Although, somehow I didn’t think it was just that. I could feel a softness through our bond, an affection that I wouldn’t have expected from him. Of course, he still seemed a bit grumpy, but I could feel his anxiety lessen. I felt proud that I had managed to make him feel better to some degree.

“I am going to get you clothes,” he said as he kissed my shoulder after finishing my hair.

I turned and looked up at him, offering a small smile. “Thank you, Charm.”

“Any time, birdy,” he offered sincerely and then scowled. “Don’t leave until you’re fully dressed— there are way too many fuckers out there right now.”

There is the Charm I know.

I couldn’t help but let out a small laugh, but as he stood to his full height, pinning me with a look, I paused, my breath catching. Holy hell, he was hard. My eyes widened as he grunted and cursed under his breath before leaving, a hot streak of lust running through our bond. I inhaled, closing my tired eyes as I tried to not get all worked up again.

The reality of everything slowly began to filter through my head as I covered my face with my fingers, submerging myself in the tub completely before letting out a soft exhale. I would not have a panic attack. I could do this. I just needed to stay level-headed. There was a chance my mates were at risk, and that was far more important than anything else.

Questions plagued my mind, though. How the hell had this night turned into such a shit show? Hadn’t dinner been enough? Hadn’t David’s dark magic and almost killing Charm been enough?

Groaning, I shook my head, feeling frustrated as hell. The worst part? My magic wasn’t happy, not yet. *No, apparently unless it had all of them marked, it wouldn’t be happy.* Well, too fucking bad. I wasn’t going to sentence them to that.

What if they wanted to be marked, though? Like Chait? But I couldn’t think like that.

When the door opened again, I looked up to find Charm setting down a pile of clothes. His eyes rested on my shoulders where my mating marks were, a streak of boldness coursing through me as I stood up. A strangled sound broke from his throat as he tried to keep his eyes on my face, failing miserably. He greedily looked over my body, my skin heating as a low growl built in his throat. My smile grew as a sudden pounding on the door had him snarling, throwing the door open, and leaving, making me wonder who had been on the other side. I should be mad at them for ruining my teasing.

Not that I was any good at it.

Looking at the mirror over the vanity in front of me, I peeled off my slip to reveal my lean frame. I nibbled my lip, feeling a surge of insecurity at my body, something I had never cared about before. I had some curves, but

I was mostly lean muscle, looking far more athletic than someone that was curvy and soft. More feminine.

My chest squeezed, wondering what the guys thought about me. I mean, in the past, my appeal to men was something I absolutely hated, because of the guards who tortured me, but now… now it was important to me. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, exactly.

Gently, I ran my fingers through my hair before squeezing out some of the extra moisture, leaning forward to examine the dark circles under my eyes. My scars were stark and visible against my pale skin, and my wet, dark hair made me look even paler than normal. I knew I looked rough, and considering the trauma I'd undergone, it shouldn't have been all that surprising. Yet, in all technicality, I was healed.

Not that it would matter to my mates. No, I may not know them perfectly, but if the panic through the small, hesitant group bond I could feel was accurate, then it was going to be a very long night.

Drying off the rest of my body, I grabbed the pile of clothes Charm left me. I blushed at the pair of pale cream-colored panties and matching bra, feeling somewhat excited over him choosing them for me.

You know, this blushing bullshit was getting very old. Hopefully the guys didn't catch on.

Shimmying them on, I frowned, hating that my tattoos were missing. I just didn't understand where the hell my familiars were. I could feel my connection with them, but it was weak. It didn't feel as if they were in danger, just… absent?

Rolling back my sore shoulders, I pulled on the rest of my clothing as my scars tingled. The soft oversized sweatpants and hoodie set smelled like Valerio, and I let out a happy sigh as I pulled the sleeves down over my wrists. Charm knew me far too well. He could have brought me my own clothes, but instead he'd brought this, and it was helping immensely.

When the door opened, I assumed it would be Charm, but instead found myself looking at Zed. My skin broke out in shivers immediately upon seeing him, my magic leaking out and trying to wrap around the dangerous predator. His eyes flashed darkly, only encouraging me that much more. There was absolutely no reason for why I wanted this massive, dangerous man to submit to me, but it was a dark urge under my skin, and I could feel how much his magic wanted me to do so. It was practically rubbing up against me, our magics very similar in the nature of how they wanted to

take and take. I just knew he wouldn't take from me without permission. *I wasn't positive my magic followed the same rules.*

I couldn't help the flash of imagery that played out in my head, imagining those burning violet eyes watching me as I rode his massive frame, those large hands grabbing my waist and encouraging me. I swallowed as he stepped closer, his shirt and pants dark and sophisticated, nearly the same color as his oil-colored hair. My eyes flashed down to his full lips, imagining the fangs I knew were behind them and wondering just how much he wanted to bite me. I knew he wanted to, but I wanted to know to what extent.

Fuck. I had no idea what it was about this man, but his hybrid power of being both an incubus and blood mage made me feel almost possessive over him. Like he was mine. The concept of him feeding off of anyone else infuriated me, and I could feel a hot flash of anger run over my skin at the mere thought. I knew I couldn't tell him that though. He was absolutely crazy, and his sadistic streak would only be encouraged by my radical attitude.

His expensive cologne wrapped around me as he crossed the room slowly.

"Angel," Zed's velvet voice had me swaying slightly, my head falling back as his large hand wrapped around the back of my neck in a firm hold.

"Zed," I breathed out his name, my fingers crawling up his chest, and I felt a seductive purr breaking into my voice.

That was unexpected. Where the hell was this boldness coming from?

Oddly, my control was tighter than ever, my magic feeling relaxed as his cold, almost steely power brushed against me, his hips pinning me against the vanity as a smile pulled up on my lips. My breath stuttered slightly as he dipped down, and I honestly had no idea what to expect from him… but the way he wrapped his arms around me so fiercely that it had tears welling in my eyes caught me off guard and broke my chest open in a way I hadn't expected.

When he lifted me easily onto the counter, I tightened my legs around him so that he was pressed against me. I could feel how hard he was, but I didn't move. I didn't want to break from the moment where I was buried in his chest, his chest releasing a soft rumble that made me close my eyes in pure bliss.

A sudden urge to release my wings so that he could run his fingers along their edges broke through my brain, but I resisted. I had never had someone touch my wings affectionately, and the concept sounded dangerous, amazing, and emotional. Would he want to? I couldn't risk hurting him… but maybe Chait or Charm would want to touch them? The light butterfly texture was soft to the touch but unbreakable in texture. *Would it be weird to ask? Probably.*

"You scared the hell out of me," Zed rumbled as I pulled back slightly, his stark, stunning skin almost looking paler than normal. I ran my fingers over it gently, his eyes closing in relief. He really had been worried. Guilt filled me as I found myself even more determined to figure out what had happened so I could avoid hurting them in any way, shape, or form.

Was it wrong that I loved how worried he had been? How worried they had been? That sounded horrible. I, of course, didn't want them to be worried, but it was also reassuring to know how upset they had been, because I knew if anything like this happened to them, I would have been an absolute mess.

"I hate that I don't remember," I admitted in a small voice.

I knew I needed to tell them about the woman in the forest, at least. It was the only thing that I could solidly remember, but even that seemed somewhat abstract. Was it possible that she'd been a delusion due to my head injury? My brain pulsed as I tried to remember details of her face, but I couldn't come back with anything concrete, just the feeling of her power and the sound of her voice. It was so goddamn frustrating.

"We will figure it out, angel, I promise," he assured while gently turning me towards the mirror so that I was sitting on top, cross-legged. I watched him curiously as he opened up a drawer and pulled out two different brushes, settling on the slightly larger one before beginning to brush my hair.

It was gentle, and his lavender eyes were fully focused on his job. My smile grew at the sight of this stunning, slightly insane man brushing my hair. It was distracting enough that I couldn't even feel nervous about his fingers being so close to the scars on my back, despite the coverage the hoodie provided. I think I knew Zed wouldn't hurt me. He had held me when I was at my most vulnerable and having a panic attack a few days ago, and even now he was treating me as if I were far more delicate than I actually was.

I didn’t know a lot about Zed—and I wanted to know far more than I did—but there was an instinctual knowledge that came with being around the man that assured me that he wouldn’t hurt me. I wanted to trust him, and that was something that surprised me to a bone level. I mean, I knew he also wanted to drink my blood, and as he stated, ‘bury himself into me several ways,’ but it was that blunt nature that made me trust him a bit more. I think I knew he wasn’t one to keep secrets.

“I hope so,” I responded to figuring it out.

His eyes met mine through the mirror, my ears heating as he flashed me a smile. “Trust me. We will. I’m going to rip out the throat of anyone that thinks they can hurt you.”

I refused to admit that I let out a small, happy sigh at that notion. My emotional walls, which weren’t nearly as solid as they’d been before, shook as he placed down the brush and stepped closer to me, making me tilt my head up so that I could feel his strong jawline and burning eyes. I let out a soft sound as he pressed his nose to my hair before trailing it down my neck and burying it against my throat. I was damn near positive he was smelling me—smelling my blood, that is—and I couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped.

His smile pressed against my skin, fangs included. I should have been more nervous about his teeth against my neck—I mean, my instincts were telling me to knock him away from us—but the other part of me was relishing in the feeling of our mate holding us in such an intimate way.

“How is your head healed?” Zed wondered aloud. “You were bleeding so fucking much before. It smelled amazing.” I could see the guilt in his eyes at the truth of his statement, but I didn’t fault him for it. I knew he didn’t like that I’d been hurt, but as I had recently figured out, bloodlust was bloodlust, and there wasn’t a damn thing you could do about it.

“I may have fed off Chait,” I mumbled, feeling a bit nervous and embarrassed by my lack of control. “He let me mark him. I tried to tell him it was a bad idea—”

Zed’s soft chuckle had me pausing as the sound filled the space, causing me to meet his affection- and amusement-filled gaze. “Of course he fucking did. That doesn’t surprise me at all, angel. Don’t go blaming yourself for the position he purposefully put himself in.”

Chait had literally saved my life, so… still my fault.

Before I could ask what Zed meant by the last part, he lifted me from the counter and led me out of the room, his fingers pressed gently to my lower back as I looked around Charm's bright bedroom. The room I had fallen asleep in only hours ago. Where was Philip? Had they moved him? The white, airy room was bathed in darkness, and I squinted at the lighting change as we entered into the large main lounge, the voices from before clearly originating from the space.

The head commanders' dorms were set up like spokes on a wheel. There were eight in total, each having a door from an outside hallway leading in, and then the space itself, featuring a bedroom and bathroom suite. A secondary door led to a hallway that brought each room to this center lounge that served as the living space for the commanders.

It was honestly a beautiful space, filled with dark wood and stone that arched to a high peak where light bounced off the room, ridding it of shadows from the candles and massive fireplace. Right now, the tables were cleared of books, the large, circular table at the center instead covered in what appeared to be maps and documents that my men, along with some other Red Masque teams, were looking over. I tried to not let the sight of other men in our living space bother me, but my chest squeezed uncomfortably as Zed urged me forward, making me realize I'd come to a full stop.

That was when people began to notice me standing there, and I straightened myself up automatically, my face blank of emotion as I searched the room and found Valerio. The man was leaning against one of the large leather couches talking to someone, and as his eyes met mine, I saw relief along with dozens of other emotions course through their fathomless depths. I was crossing the room before I could stop myself, trying to not look like a needy fucking puppy but wanting to feel the fairly intimidating command leader near me. I suppose I should have considered that he was technically at work, but I didn't think Valerio gave a fuck.

Instead of waiting for me to get to him, he stepped away from the conversation he was in and immediately pulled me into his arms, a sigh of relief breaking from my chest. I could hear silence growing around us, but I didn't care. My hands only tightened in his shirt, refusing to give the others any attention. If they didn't like it, then they could get the fuck out. Valerio's lips brushed my forehead, and I jumped slightly as Cannon's voice echoed through the room, tempting me to look up at him, but unable to

because of the death grip that Valerio had on me. His arm was now wrapped around my waist so tight it felt like an iron band, and his other hand was holding my head to his chest as if he were somehow hiding me from the rest of the room.

“Get back to fucking work!” Cannon’s voice filled the space, barking out an order that instantly had the room moving into action. I felt better the minute their eyes weren’t on us, and I felt the man holding me loosen his grip just slightly. I mean, I didn’t blame them for looking… not exactly. I knew my reputation in the Horde, paired with my heritage, and I was starting to understand that my mates’ reputations didn’t allow for the softness of our embrace that most people were noticing.

Although there really was nothing soft about him or the way his magic was holding me possessively. That invisible, deadly magic that I knew could not only read the fears but project the fears of those around him, making Valerio one of the most dangerous men in the room, something that my magic fucking loved. She didn’t even fight his dominant tug on us, giving into it like she had expected Zed to give into us. Sometimes I really thought our magic had a better understanding of our dynamics in relationships than we did.

Finally, I looked up into Valerio’s dark, fathomless eyes like midnight voids that twinkled with danger, as his jaw tightened with concern at my expression. His familiar midnight scent, a mixture of rain and night magic, soothed me into an almost pliant state where I was pressed against him, his forehead pressing to my own as his throat released a small rumble. I knew the man chose his words carefully, so I didn’t expect him to say anything. My fingers ran up his neck to gently run through his dark amethyst-colored hair that was messy, as if he had run his fingers through it a million times. His grip tightened again, almost uncomfortably, as his lean, runner-like muscles tried to literally mold me to his body. Despite being shorter than most of the others at 6 feet, Valerio was every single inch of the warrior I knew he had trained to be, and I had a feeling that he was the last person in this room I would ever want to fight. And not just because I found him sexy as hell.

There was a penetrating and dangerous nature to Valerio, one that had me wanting to give into this thing between us. Valerio wasn’t exactly one to bullshit, and he didn’t talk a lot, but his voice was almost addictive when he did speak. It was nearly as bad as his stunning smile, so he was really

giving everyone a reprieve from being addicted to him when he kept so damn serious all the time. I'm not joking—if the man started tossing smiles around, I would probably just stare at him in awe, like an idiot.

"Commander, we need to finish our conversation," a deep voice said, drawing Valerio's attention away from my gaze. He let out a small growl before leading me towards a large leather chair he'd been leaning against. He ushered me into the seat, and I pulled my feet up as he ran his fingers through my hair, looking at the two men he'd been talking to before, both of them trying to avoid eye contact with me.

"Talk." Valerio's voice was cold and hard, the exact opposite of the way he was touching me. I watched them curiously, one of the men flinching when meeting my gaze, and the other keeping his eye on Valerio with speculation. Finally, he spoke again.

"The entire room reeks of dark magic." His eyes hardened from a soft blue to ice as a weird power seemed to surge around him, making me wonder what exactly he was. The magic felt almost foreign, as if it didn't really belong in this realm, and I could see the weight with which Valerio weighed his words before he asked for clarification.

"The dorm?"

"Specifically, Charm's suite, where I assume they'd been sleeping," the man explained. "It's possible that what I'm sensing is Dark Fae magic, but after being around her for a few moments, I don't think it's that. It feels almost like a tracking spell, or possibly a summoning spell. It may explain how she left the room without anyone actually taking her from it."

I blinked, trying to process the man's words as Cannon's chest let out a rumble, his massive frame crouching down to be next to me. Instead of focusing on the summoning spell concept, I offered him a small smile, not positive I had anything to contribute just yet. You learned a lot when you didn't talk, and it also gave me the ability to look over my massive wolf mate, who was looking entirely too handsome for this time in the night… morning… whenever the hell it was.

There was an aggressive, primal energy to him tonight, and while I felt that vibrating under his skin normally, tonight it was more prominent. I could practically see his wolf brushing over his skin as his white-hot eyes examined my expression, his golden skin and dark messy hair contrasting the way they nearly glowed, making them stand out even more. The pull between this man and I was dangerous and a bit savage, making me want to

pull out the predator I knew that was waiting to come out to play. My fingers came out to run over his cheek as his wolf let out a low growl at my touch, his earthy scent filling the space as I found myself leaning into him further.

Valerio was talking to the strange man, and I wasn't catching any of it, instead caught in a slight staring match with Cannon. There was nothing aggressive about it, but I couldn't help but enjoy the way he was looking at me with adoration and heat. Like he wanted to hold me and fuck me at the same time.

"You don't need to stay up to deal with any of this shit," Cannon's honey-smooth voice filled the space between us. "You should be resting. We can watch over you while you sleep."

Now why did I have a feeling that someone would always be around watching while I slept from now on? Not that I blamed them, although maybe it was just better if I didn't sleep. That would solve all of this.

"Where is Philip?" I asked suddenly, my eyes widening as I stood up, Cannon's massive frame stretching to his full height. Valerio caught my waist to steady me as Cannon went to respond, but that was before a harsh voice drew my attention away from both of them.

"I don't give a fuck," Maddox snarled at three men, walking out from one of the bedrooms. "Bring David's uncle here, now. You can tell SE whatever the fuck you want, but I want him here for questioning." *David's uncle? Did they think he was part of this?* I suppose two attacks by the same people in one night wasn't that far-fetched.

Valerio sighed. "Maddox, the Royal Guard are already—"

"I don't care," he snarled in response, his head snapping towards Valerio before his gaze met mine. Clearly, he hadn't realized I was out here, because the change was nearly automatic. I should have expected his response, but the man still managed to somehow surprise me.

A small squeak left my throat as I was ripped away from Valerio and Cannon in the blink of an eye, my frame squeezed against the insane man as he tried to completely wrap me up in his frame. The vibrating power underneath his skin should have scared me, but instead I found myself running my fingers along his bare chest. Oh man, why did I feel like Maddox was losing it a bit? I was starting to think that Chait, Charm, and Zed were the only relatively calm ones right now, and even they were questionable.

Once again, really trying to not be flattered by how worked up they were.

When someone attempted to say his name, Maddox let out a legitimate growl. Not a rumble. Not a snarl. Nope, this was like Cannon, a legimate fucking growl that had the entire room silencing. I bit my lip, trying to not smile at that as I looked up into a pair of emerald eyes that were far darker than normal and completely focused on me.

I didn't even question it when he bent slightly to lift me up, my legs and arms wrapping around him as he set me on a table, conversation picking back up behind him. His massive, muscular frame shielded me from the rest of the room, and I watched him with curiosity and a lot of affection as he seemed to finally relax a bit after pressing a kiss to the top of my head and smelling my hair. What was it with the smelling my hair and biting me? Was it just me, or was this becoming a thing? I mean, don't get me wrong, I was absolutely loving it, but I had a feeling that it wasn't exactly a normal thing to do.

"You okay, Mad?" I asked, using his nickname. His eyes brightened into a neon lime-green, and a lazy, charming smile snapped onto his face as if he had never been worked up in the first place. Well, except for the way his static-charged magic seemed to vibrate defensively behind him, the ability to warp literal reality at the tips of his fingers. That and the ability to read minds, which would probably make anyone tense in a room so dense with people.

"Perfect, teacup." He pressed a kiss to my nose. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better," I admitted, not explaining why. "You seem tense though."

"You were taken from us." His smile disappeared. "Literally taken from the fucking room."

I nodded slowly in understanding as my fingers brushed over his large, cut chest, his 6'5'' build somewhat overwhelming, especially when paired with the unhinged light filtering through his gaze. Not that I was worried about him hurting me, but with Maddox, you never fully knew what he was going to do. It was exciting and terrifying. And why was he shirtless? That was completely unfair, considering I could literally see his muscular V that met the dark jeans he was wearing.

A small frustrated sound broke from my lips as I followed some of his neck tattoos up past the vicious scar he had that trailed side to side, like

someone had tried to literally remove his head, up towards the runes that trailed from temple to jaw on one side of his face. The man was absolutely lethal and had a dizzying effect on me that I wasn't positive he was fully aware of. His fingers brushed through his bright red hair as a slight shudder went through him, my fingers continuing to trace his neck and shoulders as a growl built in his throat.

I knew I was playing a dangerous game here.

Maddox murmured something in French before placing his forehead to my shoulder as if trying to calm himself down, my eyes focusing on the room behind us. I felt my body still, realizing half the men—not my mates, obviously—were staring at us in horror, as if Maddox was about to fucking kill or eat me. Not that I would mind the latter.

Maddox turned sharply, his voice filled with command. "Mind your fucking business."

All of them looked away as Cannon ran a hand down his face and Valerio offered me a look as if this was somehow my fault. I shrugged, half amused at their reactions before focusing back on the man holding me. The man that I probably not so casually loved… liked… loved.

I am pretty damn positive I was in love with him.

"Maize," Maddox's voice was soft and filled with a bit of awe, my cheeks turning bright red at the way he was eyeing me.

Then the realization hit me. *Did he*… no, he would say something, right? Maddox's gaze darkened as he watched me with a fuck ton of emotions I couldn't fully delve into.

Did this motherfucker just read my mind again? Oh shit. No, no, no. These were thoughts for tomorrow.

"What?" I asked cautiously, leaning back slightly. He tugged me against him again, his chin resting on top of my head as he murmured something I couldn't hear. What the hell was going on with him right now?

"Tell the Guard that we need to try to match the magic signature and see if he has anything to do with it," Cannon demanded. His voice brought me out of the hazy lust bubble of being held by Maddox as I realized I still had yet to check on Philip. Gently pressing a hand to Maddox's chest, he stepped back and I looked around the room, wondering which bedroom they had taken him into.

The man next to me intertwined our fingers and led me towards Philip's bedroom knowingly, making me breathe out a sigh of relief. I was focused

enough that I ignored the other teams, keeping my head high despite having been through some shit. Sure, I could be vulenrable around my men, but I wasn't some wilting fucking flower, and I didn't want anyone else to see me like that. I may have been willing to express my fears and desires to my mates, but anyone outside of that circle was shit out of luck.

Well, except for maybe Gray. She was cool, and she didn't seem to view emotions as weak, so I could probably open up to her, but honestly, the concept still freaked me out. I was a bit embarrassed after crying in front of her only a day or so ago, so I would probably need to work up the nerve to see her and not feel like a total little bitch. I frowned, realizing that if the Royal Guard knew, she probably knew as well. Honestly, I wasn't positive how I felt about everyone being aware of what had occured. I didn't really want people worrying about me.

"People who love and care about you will always worry," Maddox rumbled as I snapped my head towards him, my mouth dropping. He winced, realizing his mistake, before offering me a cheeky grin. I stopped and poked his chest.

"Did you just read my mind?" I demanded, feeling eyes on us.

He let out a low rumble, his magic sparking the air as he tightened his hold on me. "Sort of difficult not to, teacup."

"Just don't!" I exclaimed, my cheeks red.

"I promise, I'll try." He flashed me a smile as I scowled, turning towards Philip's bedroom. Chait, who was leaning on the door waiting for us, offered me an amused, sexy look. My eyes strayed down to his lips distractedly as I pretended to not think about what we'd been doing only a little bit ago. Nope. That wouldn't do any good right now, not at all.

"You marked him," Maddox pointed out, making me jump as he nipped my ear. It made me realize I'd paused in front of Chait and was now caught between them. The power radiating between the three of us was suffocating… and I loved it. I could feel a darkness rising from Maddox, though, that hadn't been there before, making me eye the man curiously. There was for sure something going on with him, like way more than normal.

"I did," I answered, my voice holding a relaxed edge I wouldn't have expected. I think I kept expecting them to get mad about me marking Chait. I knew I was mad at myself in some ways. Not because I didn't want my mark on him, but because I felt guilty. I'd spent my entire life avoiding my

magic, and then for him to ask me to use it, to heal myself, felt… odd. Just odd. Not bad, but very odd.

It also made me feel accepted in a way that I never had before.

“Fuck!” I literally jumped up, hitting Maddox’s jaw as he cursed in French, Valerio offering us both a look from where he had literally just appeared. His eyes ran over Chait’s mark, my mate watching our commander with amusement, before he turned his gaze to me. I made a small squeak against his lips as he dipped his head to give me a hard, searing kiss, confusing the ever living fuck out of me when he walked back across the room as if that hadn’t happened to begin with.

Was… was I going crazy here? What the hell was going on?

“You’ve marked Charm and Chait,” Maddox hummed, his voice oddly clinical, as if he was thinking about something. I looked back at his expression as Chait chuckled softly, Maddox’s eyes flashing with a feral light before filling with amusement. I felt my toes curl slightly as I held back my teasing comment asking him if he wanted to be marked as well. That was one hundred percent my magic, and I wasn’t condoning it.

Shit. I needed to stop wanting to poison my mates.

My magic seemed amused at my inner banter, but both of us were distracted by a noise coming from Philip’s bedroom that immediately had me moving past my two mates and into the doorway. A cold chill of reality washed over me as I walked into the room, my jaw tightening at how pale Philip appeared, sitting with his back against the headboard, struggling to stay upright.

Charm and Zed were also in the rich and luxuriously decorated room, but I put little thought to that as I sat down on the edge of the bed, the silk sheets cold to the touch as I shivered at the familiar power running over Philp’s skin. *My* power, more specifically. I didn’t fully understand how that was possible.

Philip was objectively beautiful and extremely dangerous. While his golden skin was pale right now, his rose-colored hair looked as shiny and prince-like as ever. He offered me a concerned look, struggling to sit up further as I moved closer, not wanting him to strain himself as his deep sapphire eyes filled with pain. I didn’t understand what was going on here. Why was he so hurt? My fingers pressed against his cold cheek as I inhaled his rose scent, knowing that I needed to say something.

Before I could, though, a jolt went through me as Philip's entire body shuddered. Those richly colored eyes closed, dark lashes squeezing shut, as I felt my magic signature leave him and flood back into me as his power surged up. Almost instantly, color filled his cheeks, his eyes snapping open to reveal an intensity I hadn't expected as that commanding magic wrapped around me, urging me to submit to him. I let out a small yelp as I found myself flat on my back with Philip over me, a dizzy spell hitting me as my skin stung exactly where my familiar tattoos usually were.

Holy fuck. My eyes widened as he let out a low dangerous noise, my wrists being held against my chest as his body weight pressed into mine, making me shiver with heat. I knew he wasn't completely himself right now, and I had no idea what to do about it. I swallowed hard as I tried to rasp out my words.

"You had my familiars?"

It made no sense, but when I drew my magic from him, unsure how it had gotten there to begin with, I'd gotten my familiars back. Philip's bare chest warmed with heat as my eyes found a rose-shaped tattoo over his heart that I'd never noticed before. It was beautiful, and I almost didn't hear his response back to me because I was so focused on the extreme detail in his artwork.

"That would explain why I felt so constricted. Something was stopping my magic." His normally charming voice filled with heat as I inhaled sharply at just how hard he was against me. This was a very different version of Philip than the one I'd fallen asleep with. There was no charming smile or joking, no vulnerability either, just this smooth darkness that threatened to drown me.

I felt a tiny bout of nerves, reinforcing the notion that I didn't know all that much about my mates. I mean, it didn't change anything, but I couldn't ignore Alexander and Griffin's words that they were in fact dangerous.

Which was why you liked them so damn much.

It was true—I couldn't help but respect raw power, and I also knew that the more dangerous someone was, the less likely they were to let me hurt them. I was protecting myself and them, in a way. Plus, my magic viewed them as worthy of being my mates because of their strength, which was a whole lot of shit I didn't want to dive into.

"How is that possible?" I tried to pull on my familiars, but they looked exhausted, their magic depleted to such an extent that realization of what

had occurred hit me, very obviously. *They had been protecting him.* I had no idea from what, but they had been protecting him for sure.

“Whoever used that summoning spell tried to kill those in bed with you.”

My eyes slid over to a man that now stood behind Charm and Zed, both of whom tensed at his nearly silent appearance. My magic wrapped around Philip protectively as I narrowed my eyes at the odd man, the same one from before that had been talking to Valerio, who offered me a rather cold, unemotional look before stepping closer. He ignored Philip’s snarl, my mate not really in the business of forming words yet.

“But it doesn’t explain why Charm didn’t get that protection as well,” the odd man said, clearly thinking through the situation out loud.

“He has different protection, we have a mating bond,” I answered, the words flowing from my mouth before I realized the conclusion I’d come to. *Fascinating.* I absolutely loved it when my mouth worked independent of my brain.

Also, was no one going to comment on how Philip was still pinning me to the bed, his nose trailing my neck? I should have been way more uncomfortable than I was, but instead his weight was like a steady assurance. I didn’t feel cornered. I didn’t even feel uncomfortable with how dark it was in the room. I just felt warm and safe. Very odd.

Charm made a pleased noise that almost had me smiling as the other man hummed as if mildly interested in what I was saying. “Fascinating.”

“Who are you?” I finally asked.

“Cirdan,” he answered immediately, “I’m an Earth realm magic user. A witch, by all technicalities. I also have fairly extensive expertise in spell casting, which is why it is very clear that this is dark magic and not mage magic.”

I didn’t even know we had witches in the Horde… then again, I was here, wasn’t I? Weirder things could occur.

He continued, “If I had to assume, your magic tried to protect them from the spell that was meant to kill both of them while you were summoned. Unfortunately, it probably also made it far easier for the magic to work so effectively. I haven’t seen magic like this in a very long time.”

How old was this man? Seriously, he looked to be in his mid-twenties, but I had a feeling he wasn’t. Also, I had to give my magic a bit of a pat on

the back for doing a good job protecting our mates. Sure, I had almost died, but better me than them. Always.

Cirdan began talking to the others as Philip finally pulled back, only to yank me against his body, pulling me under the covers so that we were curled up against one another. Exhaustion saturated my bones, and I could feel his magic urging me to sleep as his lips brushed against my forehead gently, his energy turning more soothing than aggressive.

“I’m scared to sleep,” I mumbled softly.

“Someone will stay up and watch. Sleep with me,” he urged. I met his gaze, nodding as I closed my heavy eyelids, my body sighing in relief. I really hoped I wouldn’t dream… the day had been a nightmare enough.

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CHAPTER 4

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CHARM

I was never going to sleep again.

It was clearly the only solution to this entire dilemma. I didn't care if I had to be exhausted or to never feel her soft body against mine, possibly waking up with her in my arms. *Falling asleep last night had been perfect.*

Never again though. It was the only way to make sure, without a doubt, that this absolutely never happened again. My demon let out a low threatening noise that I was able to cover in a throat clear, knowing that there was nothing in this exact moment that could be done that wasn't already being done. He didn't like that our mate was in trouble. The questions plaguing my mind were enough to truly give me a headache as I ran a hand through my hair, staring ahead at the roaring fireplace.

How the fuck hadn't I woken up?

How had I not felt her leave the bed?

My temper sparked at the concept of someone thinking they had the right to take our little bird. My little bird. *She wasn't mine.* At least, not yet…

My demon offered me a dismissive look as he wrapped up her magic securely, feeling the need to protect her even though she was sleeping in the bedroom only a few feet away with some of the others. The truth was, though, I felt the same as my demon—I was feeling sickeningly possessive and obsessive over Maize, and there was nothing I could do about it. Except maybe hide it from her.

We were on such thin ice and had such a delicate balance going on, I didn't want anything to ruin that. I didn't want to risk her not accepting me

like she was accepting my brothers. I knew I said it was okay if she only wanted them and not me, but the pain associated with that was unimaginable.

She marked us. My demon's reminder settled me slightly. He was right, she had marked us. We had forever to prove we were worthy of her attention. That was if we could manage to keep her safe.

Valerio shifted next to me, the two of us the only ones in the main lounge. The other teams had departed, and our team had gone into Philip's room to keep an eye on her while trying to catch some sleep. I could feel the exhaustion through our team bond, and I worried that it was going to make us weaker, unable to protect her from the forces that were so fucking bent on hurting her that they'd attacked twice in one goddamn night.

It could be different people. Somehow that thought was worse.

I examined the dorm space, resisting the urge to re-check the rooms or go into the bedroom myself. I knew it wasn't necessary—there were already five of us in there—but I still didn't like not having my eyes on her. I wanted to know she wasn't going anywhere. Ever.

I frowned at my internal monologue. *I was starting to sound crazy.*

I needed to stop. I needed to pull back to keep that distance between us for the sake of my sanity. I mean, fuck, I had literally washed her hair earlier. I hadn't even meant to, it had just been this ridiculous urge to take care of her that my demon had pushed to the front, and before I even realized it, she was letting out a soft hum of pleasure at my hands. Of course, I would love to hear her let out that same noise with my lips on her, but I would one hundred percent take this option as well.

My fingers found the mark on my neck as I fought the urge to go stare at the star that I'd left on her collarbone. I didn't trust myself to climb into bed with her right now, not when I was this worked up. I would end up burying myself inside of her, hiding her underneath me, just to make sure no one ever saw her again.

I wish I could even tell you that these extreme emotions had to do with the drug-like, addictive quality her magic had, but I knew it was more than that. I'd been craving her and trying to push away from her since the first day we met, a constant push and pull that I was growing tired of. It wasn't worth fighting anymore, so I had no idea why I was treading so damn carefully. Self-preservation? *Possibly*.

I knew she was slowly starting to open up to all of us, and I didn't want to be the one that broke her fragile trust. I didn't want to disappoint her. I didn't want to end up being the one that fucked up her ability to put faith in people in this newfound freedom she had. That was why I was treading carefully.

Well, that and I didn't want to become too dependent on her. Didn't want her to grow annoyed with me. I didn't want to be a burden on her. It had been so goddamn painful waiting in the other room as she soaked in the bath, but I knew when she woke she would be freaked out, and I figured there were better options to comfort her. I wasn't good enough to be that person.

She marked you.

But unlike Chait, she hadn't chosen me. Not really. She'd marked me out of circumstance, and that train of insecure thinking really had the ability to drown me.

"She marked Chait." Valerio exhaled as if he had been wanting to say something but had been holding back from doing so. The man always had an eerie ability to guess what others were thinking, but somehow I felt like this had been a thought on the top of his mind since earlier. He didn't need to tell me about the bond—I'd felt it, and it had given me a surge of strength I hadn't expected. Even now, I could feel how relaxed both Chait and Maize were, their bodies suspended in a state of sleep.

I looked over at our commander as he stared into the fireplace, nearly looking like he was fucking pouting. *Ridiculous*. I didn't blame him, but it was still ridiculous that he was upset that she hadn't poisoned him, essentially.

My demon huffed as he offered me a knowing look. Not only were we thrilled she'd marked us, but I didn't truly view it as poisoning. I mean, I'd been through it… I had very much almost died, that wasn't in question. But the high of forming a bond with her and having my magic lay claim to her? Absolutely fucking worth it.

I shared what I knew. "She fed from his magic first."

Valerio arched a brow as I continued, trying to explain what I had instinctively learned about Maize's power upon forming our bond. "Without her familiars, who were protecting Philip, Maize had no way to draw on the excess energy that they usually hold for her. So she wasn't healing, and her magic had somehow been depleted. I could feel how weak she was, Valerio,

and when she woke, I felt how hungry she was. She not only fed off of Chait's magic but his life force, his literal blood."

I inhaled, ignoring the surge of jealousy from my demon. "When her magic burst back into her, it marked him. He also knew *exactly* what he was doing, for the record." *And, without a doubt, was completely thrilled with the results.*

"She fed off him like Zed," Valerio pointed out as I nodded.

We sat in silence before he grunted, "She loves him."

My lips pulled up into a smile. "They've known each other for over a year."

Valerio ran a hand over his face, his frustration evident. I felt bad for my brother because I knew he wasn't good at shit like this. Most of us weren't.

I assumed that the others had experience with other women, but we had never really talked about it. None of us had dated since I joined the Red Masques, so as far as I was concerned, no one had any fucking practice dealing with shit like this. I'd always been way too fucking exahusted to get involved with others, and frankly, my demon was really fucking picky. Now I knew it was because he'd been waiting for Maize.

My ears heated as I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly regretting not having any experience. I bet Maize would find that weird as fuck, so I was going to do my best to never let her know because I had absolutely no idea how to deal with an insecurity like that. *Maybe she wouldn't care. Maybe she wouldn't care at all.* I sure as hell wasn't about to go out and sleep with someone just for experience—the concept made my demon furious and me somewhat sick to my stomach. Fuck it. I wasn't going to overthink this shit. Not with everything going on.

"I don't know how to be like that… like how he is with her," Valerio admitted softly, his eyes flashing with a vulnerability I rarely saw. Chait and Valerio were about as different as one could imagine. Valerio was good at a lot of shit, but expressing his emotions? Not something he practiced often. It was what made him such a fantastic commander. Chait, on the other hand, had always been able to express his emotional spectrum even to us, and while he was more relaxed, he never shied away from expressing his opinion to any of us. Personally? I'd had my emotions rejected enough throughout my entire childhood, too much to express my opinions openly. Especially when they left me vulnerable. Being a prideful asshole was different than telling someone how you felt about them.

“Maize isn’t asking you to be like Chait,” I pointed out, sitting forward as I picked up my glass of dark whiskey from where it sat on the massive, worn wood table. The fire crackled as Valerio nodded, looking unconvinced. Then again, I wasn’t very fucking persuasive.

His next words went in a different direction. “Cirdan is almost positive that the magic that was used was old Horde magic, nothing that exists now. It has the same signatures as the ones used in the hall at dinner, so obviously David has more people working for him than just his uncle.”

“Cirdan still creeps me out,” I said in amusement. It was better than the dread associated with feeling like a complete fucking failure. I’d been sleeping right goddamn next to her, and I’d felt nothing. My demon had been as confused as myself.

It made no sense.

“He’s a witch,” Valerio explained, “and a really fucking old one. I would be shocked if he didn’t make you uncomfortable. His magic is the exact opposite of ours.”

I nodded and asked a question I’d been wondering for some time. “Why the Red Masques? I mean, he clearly doesn’t need a job, so why is he here?”

His chuckle was legitimately amused. “I don’t have confirmation, but I heard he is looking for something… or someone. I just hope for their sake he doesn’t find them. I wouldn’t want to ever face off with Cirdan.”

I one hundred percent agreed with that statement.

After a few moments, I let out a frustrated sigh. “We have to figure out how to keep her safe, and we can’t do that if we don’t know who has the goddamn ability to pull her from our bed.”

“I still think this relates to David.” Valerio leaned forward and grabbed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. I arched a brow because I didn’t think I’d ever seen him smoke… but then again, I don’t think I’d ever seen him this worked up either. “How the kid managed to just goddamn disappear from the Horde is beyond me. It makes me furious that we didn’t catch onto this sooner.”

“I don’t think any of us were expecting the hostility towards Maize, especially from within the Horde.” I shook my head. “Our kingdom’s entire identity is based around being different, being the ‘rejects’ from other realms. Seems hypocritical that everyone has no problem treating her how we were treated for so long in the rest of the Fae realm.”

Valerio inhaled on his cigarette, the scent of tobacco crowding the space. “Power does that to people. Shows us that we aren’t better than the perceived evil we are fighting against. Makes me even more pissed that we didn’t predict it.”

“She’d barely been here a week.”

“Still.”

Still was unfortunately correct. We’d been so caught up in all the other bullshit that we’d barely noticed that someone was targeting Maize until it was right in front of us. She hadn’t trusted us to let us know that someone had confronted her those first few days, and I didn’t blame her. We hadn’t been listening. When she mentioned to Maddox that she didn’t feel welcome here, I’d assumed she’d meant by us… which just showcased my ego and self-centered nature more clearly.

I could be better than that. I just needed to prove that to Maize.

A soft sound had me turning towards Philip’s door as a sleepy Maize walked out from the bedroom, her face almost iridescent in the fireplace light as her eyes flashed with a coolness that I’d come to recognize. How much did we want to bet that she hadn’t slept well or had been woken up by nightmares? The minute her eyes fell on mine, I offered a hand and she crossed the room, her cheeks filling with color at the realization we were both staring at her.

“You haven’t slept yet?” she asked us softly, her body curling into the couch between us. I didn’t bother fighting the urge to intertwine our fingers together. *Good job at keeping distance, Charm. Fucking excellent.* It was worth it to see her smile and to watch that small blush invade her face, though.

I desperately wanted to know if the rest of her body turned that pink when she was turned on. When I was buried between her legs as I pinned her hands to the bed, not allowing her to move, wringing out every fucking ounce of pleasure from that perfect body…

“Charm.” Valerio’s voice had me snapping my eyes up from where I was clearly squeezing Maize’s hand too hard, caught up in my own fantasies that would never come to light. Her eyes watched me curiously as my ears heated. Clearly, I had some goddamn control issues. Unsurprising and pretty on character for me, unfortunately. My demon was even worse.

One blessing? The more time I spent around Maize and the tighter our bond grew, the easier it was to guess what she was feeling. Right now, there

was just curiosity and affection, two things I didn't want to look into too much, because if she was curious, there was a fuck ton of things I could show her… and I needed to stop. She could probably feel through the bond how fucking turned on I was.

"Sorry." I kissed the top of her hand before I could stop myself, and she sighed happily, closing her eyes while leaning against Valerio. My teammate offered me an arched brow as if I was losing my mind, and I nearly laughed at that. He wasn't far off from fact on that end.

Almost as if knowing what Valerio would ask her, either in a few minutes or later that day, she spoke quietly, keeping her eyes closed.

"After falling asleep between Philip and you," she began, squeezing my hand, "I woke up somewhere cold. A forest, maybe? I was freezing, and my head hurt so goddamn much. My magic was completely gone. I have no idea how that is even possible… unless they drained it? I mean, I think the rest of my magic stayed with Charm and Philip so I could protect them in some way. Cirdan said as much, but I shouldn't have been left completely defenseless. My magic doesn't work like that."

When I'd woken up, I had been confused on where she'd gone because the bed and space around me smelled like her. I had felt her magic on my skin, yet she was absent from bed, and Cannon was yelling about her being injured. That was when I'd realized just how bad of shape I had really been in, my energy not fully returning until she had fed from Chait. Even now I was bone tired, my demon pretending like we weren't ready to tug Maize against us before falling asleep for ten years or so.

"I was so confused," she continued. "I kept hearing Cannon's wolf. I have no idea how I knew it was him, but he kept moving away from me. Then this woman came out of nowhere. I can't remember what she looked like, but she told me someone had tried to kill me. I think she even tried to heal me. After that, everything was just cold and painful, until I finally made my way out of the forest and Cannon found me. I *still* can't remember how I got there, and it is driving me absolutely insane."

I honestly think this was the most worked up I'd ever seen her, and I didn't bother to fight the urge to press my lips to her fingers again, glad that they were warm and not freezing to the touch like before. I think the image of her blue lips and frozen form would haunt my nightmares for years to come. Everything about seeing her so cold and frozen still felt wrong, my

entire energy rebelling against the notion of Maize being anything but safe and happy.

“This woman, what exactly did she say?” Valerio questioned, his voice clinical compared to the raging emotions I could feel running through me. My brain wasn’t functioning properly right now. In fact, there was only one thing on my mind at the moment, and it was figuring out a way to keep her safe. No matter what.

“Just that they tried to kill me,” Maize offered, her cheeks paling as she stared at the fireplace blankly, clearly trying to not express how much it scared her. I could feel the fear in our bond, though, and while it was small, the concept of what occurred really fucked with her head.

I just wasn’t positive why. If I knew Maize, it wasn’t as simple as her being in danger. It never was.

Honestly, I was really thankful that Maize’s eyes were so expressive, because it helped a fuck ton when trying to decode how she felt, even with the bond. In fact, they seemed to be the only part of her that wasn’t trained to repress emotions, and it made me wonder if that had to do with what she went through with Mario, if that was the one aspect of emotional communication that she had clung to. The phantom sting of electric shocks ran through me as I thought about the memory I’d seen that day during training. The day I’d pushed her just a bit too hard. I had no real idea how I’d experienced that in the first place, but it wasn’t as if I’d been seeing her memory as much as experiencing the pain associated with reliving it.

Valerio suddenly stood, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and strode towards his bedroom. He didn’t close the door as he began sorting through his large bookshelf, so I used the excuse to pull Maize closer to me. Without a second thought, she melted into my side, and I had to thank the Maker for small blessings. I had no idea if she even wanted to be this close to me, but clearly some part of her was comfortable with it.

“I don’t know if I can sleep,” she admitted quietly. “I’m a bit too paranoid I’m going to wake up in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

I nodded, and a thought jogged through my head, but I quickly dismissed it, knowing she was probably far too exhausted to train. I still wasn’t letting go of that thought fully, though. I had no idea how to convince her, but she needed to at least attempt to learn offensive measures. Even if it was just for the sake of situations like last night. How the hell her

natural defense had been so caught off guard was beyond me, but that type of risk was unacceptable in my mind.

“Do you want to go train or maybe go for a run?” Maize asked, her voice hesitant as if she thought I’d say no. Maybe my thoughts were more interconnected with hers than I realized.

“Are you feeling well enough to?” I tilted her chin up as a small challenging glint surged in her eyes and she nodded. I wasn’t about to say no to doing something that made me feel at least somewhat helpful.

Maize hopped up, and I watched her gather some clothes before slipping into my room to change. I looked down at my shirt and sweatpants, knowing it would have to do. I didn’t trust myself to go in there while she was changing. I was already on edge with the concept of training with Maize.

Valerio had yet to come back out, so I stood and walked over to his room, finding him scanning through a few books. I almost laughed. If there was one thing Valerio could be, it was obsessive. I knew his cousin, Fox, could be much the same, so maybe it was a family trait. Either way, knowing him, he would continue on his mental tangent for most of the night and into the morning.

“Maize wants to go train, she can’t sleep,” I explained as he snapped his gaze up at me. “Don’t let them freak out when they wake up to her gone.”

Valerio examined my expression and nodded. “Make sure she doesn’t overdo it.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible for me,” Maize mused, leaning in the doorway next to me, appearing almost silently. I didn’t even stop the groan that broke from my throat at what she was wearing.

Spandex should have been outlawed in the Horde, specifically for her. Especially around anyone that wasn’t us.

It went without saying that Maize was always sexy, but somehow when she was in a spandex sports bra and sweats, she seemed even more so. Her dark hair fell down to her curved, lean waist, and she offered me a small arched brow as I muttered a curse and turned from the door. Valerio said something that had her laughing, the sound light and filling the space as I pulled on gym shoes.

Maize walked next to me as we made our way through the Red Masques Academy, the silent structure cold in the pre-dawn light. I looked over her to make sure she wasn’t cold, but the small smile on her face stopped me

from asking as she curiously peered around the halls and corners that we passed, seeming to feel more free to look around because it was just us. I loved that. I loved that there was a level of curiosity to Maize's personality that somewhat surprised me.

I wanted to show her more of the Horde. Show her more of the place that I was hoping she would stay in, even if it was just for the others. *Could you tell I was insecure about my place in her life?*

"Why did you join the Red Masques?" Maize asked curiously, her expression thoughtful as she looked up at me. Sometimes I forgot how much smaller she was than me, her magic so deadly and powerful it made her seem ten times larger in energy than she actually was.

I answered honestly instead of going with my gut reaction to say something generic. "Honestly? To get away from my parents' toxic relationship."

I was going to stop there, but I continued. "My father wasn't surprised when I requested to join the Academy. There had been a particular instance, when my mother had openly cheated on him with his own brother at a party, and he took me to the Horde. My father likes to come here sometimes to vacation or to get away from my mother, not as often as before, but I think it was maybe more for my benefit, in retrospect… Anyway, one time when we visited, I found out about the Red Masques Academy, and I was all too eager to leave my parents to their miserable lives. Especially since I somehow always got put in the middle of it. I've seen my father a few times since then, but I don't think my mother has ever fully forgiven me."

Ending my ramble, I looked down to find Maize watching me with rapt interest, her eyes a deep ocean blue as understanding flashed in her gaze. "I'm glad you came here."

I offered her a small smile, but she continued, letting out a sad sigh. "I never actually knew my mother. Apparently, my father killed her moments after I was born."

When I ran a hand over her back to comfort her, she tensed slightly. I stilled, her action reminding me that she hated having her back touched, so I pulled my hand away. "Sorry, I forgot."

Maize's hand intertwined with mine as we continued down the stairs. "I need to get used to it. I know I do. It's already getting easier. Well, with you guys, at least… I mean, the group of you are a bit of a touchy bunch."

My laugh echoed through the space as we reached the heavy, dark doors of the training center. She slipped past me, and I considered briefly if this would be in any way a trigger for her, training in this room with me after last time. I didn't want it to be, but I also knew my magic hadn't been kind. I'd been a fucking asshole, and I wouldn't blame her if she never wanted anything to do with my magic again. I watched her body language, and she seemed relatively peaceful, walking across the large room as early dawn light filtered just a bit through the windows.

I didn't even know where to start with training. Unlike before, I didn't want to fight Maize or get a negative reaction from her. Before, it had felt like my only way to interact with her. Now, though? Well, now I would have been happy with just hearing her talk, which made me sound ridiculous.

It didn't change that it was true, though.

"Let's run," she suggested. I began to jog next to her, the large track that went around the perimeter of the room allowing us to run comfortably next to one another. I found myself almost smiling as I had to push myself to keep up with her, her lean, elegant frame making her far more of a natural runner than myself. I was strong, bulky in muscle, but speed? No. That was by far more of Chait's or Valerio's speciality. I tugged my hair back to keep it from my face, keeping my gaze on her form as she pulled ahead of me slightly. The woman was hypnotizing, even when working out. Everything about her was fluid and easy, like she moved without thinking. I was almost envious at how comfortable she appeared in her own skin.

After almost two miles, she signaled to stop, and her bright eyes jumped to mine as she let out a short puff of air. "Shit, running sucks."

"Well you did almost die yesterday, birdy." Her smile grew, as if what I was saying was somehow fucking amusing.

Maize stepped closer, placing a hand on my chest, somehow calming my demon immediately as she changed the subject. "I was thinking about what you were saying."

As she pulled her hand away, putting her hands on her curved waist, I found myself tracing the line of her body instead of focusing on her words.

"Which part?" I finally got out.

"The offense part," she explained, stepping back and pulling her hair into a higher ponytail before kicking off her sweatpants to reveal a pair of dark shorts. A rumble broke from my throat at how fucking hot she looked

—specifically, her pert ass—but I kept my hands to myself as she looked back up at me. I narrowed my eyes at the slight amusement in her gaze, as if she knew what she was doing to me.

She continued, stretching her arm across her chest. “It’s not natural to me, Charm. I don’t think I have ever attacked someone first. I’ve reacted to possible threats, but that’s it. I have absolutely no idea where we would even start.”

Surprise stilled me as I tilted my head, trying to figure out how to even begin to respond to that. I had always known how to attack first—I was a demon. But how did I teach it?

“Why don’t you try with me? Just try attacking me, I won’t use my magic,” I promised, stepping back a few paces and opening my arms, relaxing my frame so I wasn’t standing defensively at all. My magic was calm, and my demon was watching her with interest more than anything. I think we both were in agreement that we liked her attention fully on us right now.

It also didn’t escape my notice just how much different this moment was from the last time we were here.

Maize looked over me, her eyes flashing as her magic came alive in the room, slinking out across the floor almost hesitantly. Every instinct inside of me warred to react, but I kept my magic completely neutral, knowing it was going to be far easier for her to focus on attacking first if she wasn’t worried about me attacking her. That would just turn this into a defense exercise.

“I’m not sure my magic is going to let me attack you first,” Maize mused. “You’re my mate, everything tells me that’s not something we should do.”

I flashed an amused smile, knowing that it was still possible, considering last time. I felt a thump of happiness in my chest at the possibility that she maybe felt more for me than before, something that made her magic not want to attack me.

“I can’t attack you either or it defeats the purpose.”

She hesitated, looking nervous. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Impossible, remember?” I challenged, but knew that probably wouldn’t sell her, so instead I offered, “How about this? I’m not going to attack you, but I’m going to project your desires… and then the opposite, to cause a reaction.”

Her eyes flared with a dangerous light. “That could go…”

“Bad, I’m aware,” I agreed, but it didn’t change my mind. “Are you okay with that? If not, we can get one of the teams in here and we’ll just try to make sure you don’t kill one of those morons.” I hated that idea, but mostly because I was a jealous bastard.

“Pretty sure those ‘*morons*’ are your students.” Her lips tilted up, and then she let out a shaky breath. “No. We can do this. Let’s just give it a try.”

Immediately, as if fucking waiting for attention, my magic wrapped around her tightly like a snake. I felt hers spark against it, and she let me through her walls as I began projecting what she wanted. What I knew she wanted more than anything in life.

To be accepted.

To be loved.

I swallowed, hating the small serene smile forming on her face as she let my magic completely infiltrate her system. I hated that I was about to ruin her happiness. I wanted to make her realize that her desires could be a reality. That she could have everything she wanted and more. But… I also wanted to make sure she was safe.

“Sorry, birdy,” I whispered.

My magic inverted, and I saw the shock go through her system. I grunted as I was blasted across the room, my head cracking against the wall. My eyes opened as I found myself looking at Maize, her magic crackling around her.

Holy shit.

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CHAPTER ۵

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MAIZE

Pain shouldn’t be shocking or new to me. It shouldn’t have been surprising. Yet I was authentically surprised by the pain that lanced through me as Charm’s magic flipped like a goddamn switch, making me feel as though I’d been turned the fuck upside down. It showed me with clarity just how weak I was in that moment, all of my insecurities and flaws laid out like a picnic in front of both of us.

Unbearable disappointment threatened to drown me at experiencing such a perfect moment and having it ripped away from me like it was nothing. Like it wasn’t everything. The crippling loneliness that always threatened to invade my heart eclipsed my senses at the loss of the peace and love I’d felt surrounding me. The notions that I wanted so desperately that it took someone else’s magic for me to realize it.

Acceptance.

Love.

Why couldn’t I belong somewhere? I knew I belonged somewhere. Someone had to have wanted me around. But his magic was making it impossible for me to focus on that.

Reality blurred into horror as I realized in that moment just how dangerous Charm truly was. He’d surrounded me in a mental illusion, a cocoon of perfection, that lulled me into a secure sense of comfort, allowing me to express my vulnerabilities, let down my walls, and show how weak I was. Its seductive edge was like a purr in my ear that promised me it could give me everything I wanted… before brutally destroying it.

Shattering it.

I'd heard him say 'sorry birdy,' the echo of the words confusing me before I felt it. I felt everything twist and turn. Feelings of love turned to those of indifference. Not hatred, because that would mean someone cared. Feelings of happiness turned into sadness. Acceptance into rejection. Panic built in my chest like a volcano as images began flashing behind my closed eyes, replacing any possible good memories with false notions and fears. Yet knowing they weren't real didn't help. I tried so hard to chase those other feelings, the original ones, but soon I was drowning in the horror of what my reality could and probably should have looked like.

I didn't deserve anything else.

I didn't deserve mates

I didn't deserve love.

I was a monster.

A monster that could hurt those around me. That *had* hurt those around me.

Tears broke down my face as images of my own mates turning from me filled my vision. Jealousy turned into a furious rage at the concept of them choosing to be with others. Heartbreak at the idea that they didn't want anything to do with someone like me—a monster—consumed me.

Charm's magic was increasing the volume on my insecurities and showing me exactly what I feared. I think that was when everything turned really dark.

I imagined Mario coming back. Coming back to hurt me. What if I had never escaped? What if this was all a dream? *No.* I wasn't going back there. I may not view myself as deserving love, but I deserved fucking freedom. An unexpected rage blasted through me as my body broke into fight or flight mode, refusing to be someone's prisoner again.

My wall of constraint was destroyed when I'd let him in, so my magic lashed out around me, my wings exploding from my back. I knew in the back of my head that Charm was there, but his magic had me panicking. What if this was Mario's new head game? A pained, wounded sound came from my throat as I fought reality with fear. My eyes were unable to open as my breathing went rough, and my power expanded in a blast as my knees broke, curling in on myself. Even when my name was being called, all I could express was a whimper, frozen in place and unable to escape my impending doom.

Mario was going to trap me again.

I was so cold and weak, my body shuddering as I laid vulnerable. *How little it took to take me down.* I had done this. I had risked finding out just how goddamn weak I was, and now I knew. I was so fucking screwed.

“Maize,” a firm voice demanded in my ear as I drew in a panicked breath.

“Please don’t hurt me.” It was a rasp, the room vibrating with enough power that I couldn’t hear their response. I was floating in darkness with nothing to ground myself. I had no idea how to stop this. My panic had never been this raw and irrational.

“Birdy, I promise no one will hurt you.” A pair of firm arms wrapped around me as a sweet sunshine smell filled my lungs, causing a tremor to roll through me. I gave into the sensation, letting the coldness of my panic attack be washed away by soft demonic magic that ran over my skin, no longer presenting horrible images. Tears continued to fall as my wings folded, my body melting into a muscular chest as my lips pressed to a warm masculine chest.

Charm.

I knew this was Charm.

Charm was calming me down.

Suddenly, I could feel my body being pulled against his, and my legs wrapped around him as he wrapped his arms around me, his hands covering every element of my skin. My breathing was uneven, but I kept my eyes closed, feeling suddenly mortified over my reaction as I realized just how strongly his magic had affected me. Holy fuck. How had I messed this up? Why couldn’t I be normal? What was wrong with me? What if I had hurt him? How had the two of us gone from an angry relationship to… this?

“Maize.” His voice was like a comforting blanket as a warm hand cupped my jaw. “I need you to open your eyes for me. I need to know you’re okay. I promise that we never have to fucking do that again. We will figure something else out, birdy.”

There was fear in his voice, and it had me opening my eyes, my face flushing as I found myself staring into a pair of dark amber eyes. I blinked, feeling even more embarrassed than before despite the lack of judgement and sudden relief I saw in his gaze. I was crying, having a full-blown panic attack over the idea of being alone forever. Of being rejected. Apparently, I had more hope for my situation than I’d even realized.

Charm pressed his forehead against mine as he let out a small concerned sound, not bothering to put any distance between us.

“I am so sorry, birdy. This is absolutely my fault, that was a terrible suggestion,” he mumbled, looking ashamed as guilt ate at me. I didn’t want him feeling that way.

My hands cupped his jaw as I looked up into his eyes. “No. Charm, this is in no way your fault. I don’t think either of us expected… well, that reaction at the mere concept of losing something.” *Something I didn’t even fully have.*

His voice was rough. “How about we just stick to sparring for now and try that? We will figure out something to convince your magic to use offensive techniques, but keeping up on physically fighting is equally as valuable.”

I inhaled, shaking my head, feeling like I’d failed him in some way despite him in no way implying that. Maybe it was just disappointment in myself. I laid my head back on his chest as his fingers gently ran over my lower back, avoiding any scars and making me let out a soft hum of pleasure. It hurt for him to touch me, but in the best way possible.

Honestly, I couldn’t tell you how long we sat there in comfortable silence as I found myself tracing the butterfly tattoo that I’d left on his skin. Despite the rumble coming from his chest and his hard length underneath me, neither of us moved to change the relaxed nature of our position. His comforting grip was anchoring me and making the images disappear far faster than ever before.

“Thank you for talking me down from that,” I whispered, trying to not get turned on at the concept of how sweet he was being. I had never seen this side of Charm, and I had never known how powerful he was until today.

Frankly, I found myself in awe of him. A bit scared, but mostly in awe.

“Your magic is crazy intense,” I admitted, trying to infuse my sense of awe in my voice just a bit so he didn’t think I was saying it was a bad thing. His lips kicked up into a smile as he let me sit back slightly, the two of us still entangled on the floor.

I should have felt emotional, raw, and maybe still embarrassed, but instead I just felt… safe. It was an odd feeling, and in that moment I hoped like hell that Charm wasn’t going to break my trust. The man who had

given me the most shit when I turned up ended up being the one with a front row seat to my weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and insecurities.

“Yeah? Impressed?” he teased, arching a golden eyebrow. I could hear the concern underneath it, though, as if he was worried I would feel uncomfortable with his magic now.

I stood, and as he followed me up and wrapped a hand around my waist, I stretched my arms and answered honestly. “Yes, actually. I mean, I don’t want to be on the receiving end of that shit again, because holy fuck… but very impressive. I’m jealous of the control you have over it.”

A genuine smile broke out on his face as a flash of pride went through our bond. I groaned at how thrilled he obviously was by the compliment as I rolled my eyes, smiling as I walked towards my sweatpants, his chuckle filling the space around us.

I had no intention of working out today, and considering Charm didn’t complain, I had a feeling that he was very much on board with that. Maybe we could go upstairs and cuddle…

I pulled on my sweats, looking over to the man in question, his eyes lazily moving up from my ass. He flashed me a small smirk. Bastard.

Before I could call him out on it, the doors of the training room opened, voices bouncing off the walls. A chill ran over me, and my emotions shuddered as Charm appeared by my side, a low noise breaking from my throat at the academy students making their way into the room for what I had to assume was morning training. My back twitched to bring my wings out defensively, but there was no good reason for it.

“Let’s get out of here,” Charm mumbled as he intertwined our fingers. All eyes were on us as we made our way toward the exit. These students seemed a bit younger than the ones before, and I found myself curiously looking over the group before smiling at the two people who walked in the door.

Alexander and his brother Griffin were immediately shouting orders to start different training circuits. I didn’t have a lot of friends, but I considered the twins just that.

“Maize!” Alexander flashed a grin as Griffin offered me a head nod in greeting.

“Hey you.” I offered a warm smile, Charm’s hand suddenly on my hip as he gripped me in what I would almost call a possessive way. I leaned into

him as Alexander pinned the commander with a look before looking back at me and smiling again.

“I didn’t realize you got up so early.” He yawned, crossing his arms. “You should join us more. Maybe that would kick all of their asses into gear.”

“Unlikely,” Griffin muttered, the grumpier brother clearly not a morning person.

“Absolutely not.” Charm let out a low, threatening noise as I scowled up at him.

“What?” he demanded, arching a brow. I almost smiled affectionately at the one-eighty he did around others.

“You literally growled,” I pointed out, amused, as Alexander snickered. “Plus, if we plan on training every morning, what’s the harm in staying for a bit?”

“I did *not* growl.” Charm reared back in mock offense, amusement jumping in his gaze.

“Yes, you did,” I retorted with a smile. “But seriously, what’s the difference?”

His eyes flashed with a bright, almost sunshine color as he answered easily, “The difference is that I don’t want *them* staring at you. No one gets to stare at you but us.”

Okay, now that was a bit cute, my smile growing because that was one hundred percent his demon talking… Well, that and a little bit of Charm. I sighed, knowing I would probably feel the same about them around other women, and looked back at my friend.

“How about when we get more girls in the Red Masques, I help out with that?” I offered, attempting to find a compromise. Charm grunted, making me feel a bit better. At the same time, I realized that I’d not only expressed my intent to stay *very* long term, but also wanting to help out at an academy that hated me. It made me wonder if the teaching thing was maybe a good idea… eventually.

“Awesome,” Alexander sang as they walked further into the room, Griffin offering me another wave.

Charm, muttering under his breath, practically pulled me from the room. I couldn’t help but laugh a little as I found myself feeling a bit giddy at his attitude. I was starting to find his grumpiness a bit endearing, and that was probably a dangerous place to be. I mean… he seemed to be accepting me

for who I was, so why wouldn't I accept him? Even if he was a cocky, prideful asshole.

He was our *cocky, prideful, asshole.* My magic was extremely certain of it.

"You're laughing at me," he scowled.

"Maybe a little," I admitted, squeezing his hand as he looked down at our intertwined fingers, a smile pulling at his lips.

"I was serious. I don't like them looking at you," he grunted.

"Jealous?" I teased.

"Possessive," he countered, pressing a kiss to my temple before we made our way upstairs.

Was it wrong that I loved that?

"Maddox," I soothed, trying to not smile, "we were just training. Valerio was supposed to tell all of you." *I think I knew my words were doing very little to help.*

We had been back in the dorm for about five minutes, and the entire time had been devoted to talking down Maddox and Cannon, who'd not so slightly freaked out about where I'd gone when they had woken up to the empty bed. Valerio, who had been caught up in whatever the hell he was looking at, forgot to let them know where we'd gone, so they had spent almost five minutes losing their minds before I walked in. I had a feeling if it had been any longer than that, they would have set up a freakin' search party.

It didn't help that Maddox had noticed I'd been crying and almost automatically blamed Charm, despite my statements to the contrary. Now the demon was offering me an exhausted look at the man's antics and the way Cannon was pacing behind me, his wolf very clearly worked up. Chait, if anything, was making it worse, his small antagonistic smile focused on Charm, making me realize he had very much known where we were and for whatever reason thought it was a good idea to torture the man. I think he also found Maddox's reaction hilarious, but it was hard to share the same opinion since the man was practically vibrating with energy against me.

“I was looking something up,” Valerio muttered, looking nearly put out at the distance between us and the fact that I had not so subtly called him out. Served the man right, to be honest.

“Wow, wonder what it’s like to get reasoning from Valerio on fucking anything,” Zed mused, making me smirk as I watched the clearly well-rested man toss a crystal paperweight up in the air before catching it. Again and again. I couldn’t help but stare at the movement and just how handsome he was, his dark hair messy in the early morning.

“It is a bit of a miracle,” Philip agreed as he emerged from the bedroom, pressing a kiss to my forehead before throwing himself down on the couch.

I realized, then, that despite wearing a sports bra, there was no part of me that was worried about them seeing the scars on my back. I knew they purposefully weren’t looking, but normally I still would have been a bit more self-conscious. Instead, I found myself almost wanting them to look at them instead of pretending they didn’t exist. I knew that made no sense, but it felt like a part of accepting that part of myself.

The part that had survived.

Maddox was sitting in front of me, his hands wrapped around my thighs as I stood between his large legs. His grip was unyielding, and I could feel Cannon move closer to me, his forehead pressing onto my shoulder as his chest rumbled, making me wonder if they were going to always be like this… because I sort of really loved it.

Honestly, this was very much soothing my insecurities from earlier. My fragile heart was absorbing their affection as the walls around it slowly began collapsing in on themselves, making me want to ask for more from them. I even found myself craving their touch more, their warm hands like an anchor that made me feel grounded and centered. They were intense, vibrant, and overwhelming… exactly what I needed. I was starting to understand how mates, despite all being very different, could be so perfect for each other at the same time.

“Fuck you,” Valerio responded to Philip in a cool, relaxed tone, amusement jumping in his gaze as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes that I’d never seen on him before. My eyes flashed down to his lips, trying to not find it sexy when he lit it and brought it to his mouth. I swallowed, ignoring Chait’s chuckle as Valerio’s gaze met mine.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” I asked, trying to distract myself from the overwhelming desire that trickled across my skin at the

sight of his dark, fathomless eyes fully focused on mine. I trusted Valerio. Really, I did. But honestly, the man still scared me a bit. I mean… he just had a really dark edge to him, and I had a feeling that exploring it would be an ‘at your own risk’ experience.

I was possibly… totally… wanting to take that risk. *Yeah, because I had so much experience with any of that shit.* Insecurity flashed over me as I focused on his answer.

“No,” he admitted, his eyes flashing with frustration. I frowned, not liking that he was clearly pissed at his lack of answers. I hadn’t been trying to blame him in any way. Then again, I had a feeling Valerio was the type to focus fully on a problem and nothing else until it was solved. In this case, figuring out what the hell had happened last night.

Cannon pulled back slightly before tipping my jaw back. “What are your plans today?” The question took me a bit off guard because I had been literally with them for almost forty-eight hours, minus a few when I’d been snatched away.

“Didn’t have a plan,” I admitted.

“Come to class with me?” He flashed a reckless smile, clearly pleased with my lack of excuses. I felt a bit breathless with his smile, to be honest.

“That’s unfair,” Maddox rumbled.

“I agree, she should come to mine instead. It’s far more boring,” Philip pointed out and flashed me a smile. “You can help me yell at the dumbasses who can’t listen to directions. It’s not hard to fucking mix—”

“Angel,” Zed charmed, flashing me a dirty smirk, “Chait and I have a way more interesting schedule today. Plus, then you get to hang out with both of us.”

“I’m a fan of that,” Chait mused.

“She’s with me today,” Valerio commanded quietly, exhaling on his cigarette as my skin broke into shivers. “Besides, my classroom is centrally located, so that way you won’t be too far from Chait or Charm in case the bond starts acting up.”

“Fuck,” Charm grumbled. “Can I just come to your class instead, Valerio? The squad leaders don’t need me to watch over their shit—”

“They almost killed three people last week,” Valerio countered. “They very much need you there.”

My eyes ping-ponged back and forth between them before I broke into a smile. “Do I get to know what I’ll actually be doing all day?”

“Keeping *me* company,” Valerio offered with a heated look.

Letting out a hum of amusement, I broke from Maddox and Cannon, going to where my clothes were stored in a large chest. I arched a brow, noticing that the chest was in fact closer to Valerio’s room than normal. As in right outside of it. I met his gaze as I grabbed a stack of clothes, the others arguing as our command lead watched me with amusement and challenge. I should have called him on moving my shit to literally his bedroom door, but I didn’t, knowing that it would lead nowhere good. The man was insane.

Valerio stood up and walked towards me, waving me through his bedroom door as I realized he’d just made my life way easier. Don’t get me wrong, I loved sleeping with my mates, *but...* not knowing where to shower and put all my belongings somewhat sucked. As I stepped into his room, I instantly looked over everything with greedy attention to detail.

“I like your room,” I admitted. The dark wood floors were pretty routine, but his walls were black with heavy curtained windows and large, dark furniture that was both masculine and comfortable. The desk he had, which was facing the fireplace, had a shit ton of stuff on it, piled high, while everything else was extremely neat. The contrast was fascinating.

“Good. You’re sleeping in here tonight.” Valerio watched me, daring me again to argue. Instead, I found myself smiling. I had no idea what he hoped to get out of it, but I was somewhat enjoying pretending like I didn’t notice.

Instead I asked, “Why do you want me coming to your classes?”

Because I knew it was only partially for the reason he’d said.

Suddenly, Valerio didn’t look as sure of himself, watching me cautiously as I approached him. My clothes, in a pile against my chest, kept us apart as I looked up into his ever-changing gaze, something slightly reckless and dark right under the surface, practically begging to be played with. I kept his gaze, a sound breaking from his chest, as a smile that was far too sexy pulled onto his lips.

“I need you by me after yesterday,” he responded bluntly as my cheeks flared with color. His eyes tracked it as he stepped closer, pressing the clothes tighter between us before running his fingers under my jaw and making my body go weak. All I could think about when he was this close was what it felt like to have his mouth on me.

“We need to leave for class soon. Go get ready, baby, before I cancel it altogether.” His jaw clenched as his eyes flared with desire, clearly reading

the look in my eyes. I let out a small laugh as he walked past me, leaving me surrounded by his nearly invisible magic. Shaking my head, I turned towards him in the door, something occurring to me as insecurity hit me hard.

“Hey, Valerio?” I asked, my brow dipping as he turned towards me immediately, his gaze filled with more concern than I would have expected. “Are you sure you want me to come with? I know how the students feel, and I don’t want to mess up their ability to focus—”

I swayed back slightly as he appeared in my space again, his hand wrapping around the back of my neck as he examined my expression. A flash of frustration crawled across his face that made me feel guilty, but my guilt was quickly replaced by the surprise at his words.

“This is your home now, Maize. I don’t give a fuck what anyone else wants. If they don’t like it, they know where the fucking door is. Besides, I am holding an academy meeting tonight before dinner about what happened. By the end of the day, all of them will have a clear fucking understanding of how I feel.”

The conviction in his voice had me melting as I nodded, feeling like a dumb twit for being insecure. I murmured out a tired response. “This isn’t going to gain me any friends, Valerio. It may make it worse.”

Valerio’s smile grew wicked. “You don’t need any other friends.”

Before I could call him a nut job, his soft, sculpted lips pressed to mine in a hard, unyielding kiss. A whimper of surprise broke from my lips as the taste of tobacco passed between us, causing my entire body to tremble at the dizziness that seemed to follow. When he pulled back a minute later, I was left just feeling really fucking needy.

“You need to get ready now, or else we won’t leave my bedroom all day,” Valerio growled, walking towards the door and closing it to give me some privacy.

Trying to shake the chills he left on my skin, I walked towards his attached bathroom suite, the black and marble room making my eyes widen. It was stunning, and I found myself imagining way too many instances of Valerio and me inside here, naked, the tub taunting me with how much space there was. Oh man, now was so not the time for that.

I opened the glass door of the shower, stripping out of my workout clothes as the water began to warm and steam the space. I looked towards the mirror and let out a small sigh, feeling like my scars were more

noticeable than anything else. *My flaws were more noticeable than anything else.* Searching for symbolic meaning? Clearly.

Remembering how short I was on time, I stepped into the shower and let out a sigh. Exhaustion still rode my body hard. I had yet to really sleep. I'd nearly died yesterday. My magic was sort of out of it from earlier, and my familiars were finally waking up, making me almost immediately let them out. My body felt lighter as Sy came to life on the back of my neck, crawled over my shoulders, and jumped onto the large shower shelf that was to my right.

The black widow's multiple eyes watched me curiously as she tilted her small little head, probably about to say something ridiculous. Luckily, she didn't bother as Lu unraveled from my thigh and began to crawl up my frame and onto the shelf as well. I offered them both a tired look as I began to gently scrub my hair with shampoo, a richly scented expensive product that very much reminded me of Valerio.

"So," I began as I closed my eyes and let the soap rinse out, "either of you want to tell me what the hell happened last night?"

The two of them offered me confused glances as I began massaging conditioner into my locks, wishing it was Charm doing it. Sy's voice was tired as she asked, "You really don't remember?"

"Remember what?" Dread began to prickle on the back of my neck as my chest tightened, my stomach rolling uncomfortably.

"We had to leave you and protect the man without your mating mark," Lu offered in a slightly lisped voice, his tongue darting out. "You weren't acting like yourself, so we protected him before it got too bad."

"Not acting like myself?" I felt the conditioner rinsing from my hair, but I was frozen to the spot. "And before *what* got too bad?"

Sy's voice was soft and somewhat concerned. "Maize… you cast a spell to kill them. Both of them."

No.

That was the first thought that passed through my head as I threw up mental walls to stop the others from feeling the tsunami of emotions their words brought. Guilt. Fury. Confusion. Tears welled in my eyes as my mouth opened, feeling almost betrayed… by myself? I didn't understand how what they were saying was possible.

I would never want Charm or Philip dead.

“That’s impossible. I don’t know dark magic. Not like the kind they said was used.”

Lu confirmed Sy’s story, though. “You woke up, cast the spell, and left. We didn’t know what to do and couldn’t connect with you… it was like you forgot about us. So we kept him alive, not sure what else to do.”

My throat felt like it was closing up as I pressed my hands against the marble walls of the shower, resting my forehead against them as the once comforting hot water began to feel stifling.

I’d tried to hurt Philip and Charm? No. That made no sense. A chill rolled over my skin as I pulled my familiars back into me, not wanting to talk anymore, not wanting to face the truth. What had happened that would cause me to hurt my mates? My wings broke out of my back, the hot water running on them and making me nearly moan in relief. My eyes closed, feeling hot, as if I was going to either cry or fall asleep.

This wasn’t good.

What did I do? Did I tell them? I had to, right?

I could practically feel their magic pushing on the walls I’d put up. They wouldn’t go long without asking.

Wouldn’t this prove that I was a monster? What if I didn’t tell them and then I somehow did something worse? Was I so untrustworthy that I couldn’t sleep next to my mates without hurting them? Fuck. I didn’t trust myself, and they shouldn’t trust me.

My palms began to bleed as I trembled slightly, feeling a churning in my gut that made me realize I was close to throwing up. How had I gotten so injured? I wouldn’t have done that to myself, would I? Shakily, I turned off the shower, wrapping myself in a towel before leaning against the marble vanity and resting my forehead against the cool surface, trying to gather my wits.

I was fine. Completely and totally fine.

When I heard a knock on the door, I straightened up and walked over to it, attempting confidence. Opening it, I found myself peering up into a pair of bright lavender eyes. Zed examined my face, his eyes filled with mirth and heat, but then turned dark with concern.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I offered a small smile as his eyes narrowed on my gaze. My voice was shaky as I asked, “What’s up?”

“It is very much not *nothing*,” Zed murmured, picking up my hand and kissing my palm. The one I had injured by digging my nails into it. My entire body exploded with heat as I watched him realize that there was a fresh cut, a feral sound ripping from his throat.

Oh man. I felt his magic snap around me, both seduction and bloodlust roaring across my skin as he crowded my space, groaning my name. My knees nearly broke as he pressed his lips to the cut again, my center tightening as I swore to the gods, his tongue tracing over the cut causing my eyes to flutter shut. I wanted his lips and teeth everywhere at once, and I could almost feel a hazy, drugged symphony of pleasure crawling over my skin, convincing me to melt against him. I knew I shouldn’t… but I think I was going to anyway. I didn’t care how dangerous it was. I didn’t care if him feeding from me could result in me poisoning him.

“I don’t want to accidentally poison you,” I mumbled as he licked the cut again, his eyes turning into dark onyx stones.

“You smell so fucking good, angel.” He ignored my concern.

“Zed,” I nearly moaned his name as he kissed up my wrist gently, the insanity going through my head anything but healthy.

I craved more than just his touch. I wanted to take everything from him, and I wanted him to demand everything from me. It was distracting enough that thoughts of what had been bothering me before were becoming a hazy memory as my walls began to shake. This man was like anxiety medicine.

“Don’t say my name like that,” he snarled, his lips now against my jaw. “Not unless you want to get fucked.”

Oh, but that was exactly what I wanted.

“I want you to bite me,” I breathed out as one of his hands brushed up my waist, his thumb running against the fabric that covered my breast, my nipple pebbling under his touch as heat grew between my legs. I could feel how needy I was right now. How much I wanted him buried inside me.

“Tell me I can. Give me permission, Maize.” His mouth sucked hard on my neck as I clung to him, not making full sense of his words but loving that his lips were touching me.

You’re going to hurt him.

Shit. I knew the thought was correct, and I knew that if he truly started feeding from me, I would somehow poison him. Threaten his safety, like I seemed to make a habit of doing with my mates. The reality hit me over the head, ice trickling across my skin as I opened my eyes, inhaling sharply.

Zed was always predatorial, but right now, with the way he had me crowded against the counter with his massive frame above me? It should have been terrifying, but instead it just had me feeling like I wanted it more than before.

No. *Stop*. I had to stop.

My breathing went rough as Zed's lips moved, clearly saying something to me as he grasped my jaw with both hands. His hands, which felt hot to the touch. My body froze as my magic tried to tighten around us so that we wouldn't hurt our mate.

"Angel," Zed's voice was almost coaxing, like he was talking to a wounded animal. His lips pressed gently to mine. "Come on, I promise it's fine. I'm fine. You're fine."

It wasn't, though. Nothing was fine. I was going to fuck all of this up.

Valerio's voice filled the space as Zed kept his position in front of me. "Everything okay here?"

My head turned to look at Valerio as I nodded, meeting his gaze as I tried to not express how fucked up everything was in my head right now. Nothing was fine about this moment. Nothing was okay. I was a legitimate threat to my mates.

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CHAPTER 6

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VALERIO

Something was wrong.

Well, either that, or I had done something to fuck up. My brow dipped as I tried to remember what I could have said to make her slam a wall up between us. All of us. It was possibly Zed's fault, but with the way she'd been clinging to him in the bathroom, I didn't think that was the case. I rubbed the back of my neck, shaking my head as I let out a small rumble in my throat. The minute we were alone, I was going to pin her up against a wall until she told me what the fuck was going on.

In the span of ten minutes, during the time Maize was alone in the shower, something had changed drastically. Until I understood what that was, I was going to feel as if I was losing my goddamn mind. This something had completely changed her mannerisms from upbeat and teasing to shut down and almost nervous as she continued to curl her nails against her palms. I almost reached out to stop her from doing so, but I knew that wasn't a good idea. Especially since we were in the middle of a crowded hallway, headed toward my first class.

None of this felt important compared to Maize, though. My mate—because that was exactly what she was, even if we hadn't marked each other yet—should have been consistently happy. Or at least turned on. Hopefully both. But she definitely shouldn't be whatever this was. I watched her openly as she walked next to me quietly, my magic literally causing students to part out of our way as a tension grew at the sight of her. That annoyed me. I understood it, really, but if they didn't stop looking at her, I may lose my shit.

You could make them afraid enough to never look at her again.

I was positive that somehow that was illegal. I just wasn't positive that was enough of a reason to not do it. It didn't help that the energy around her was dark and somber, not as if she was mad at me as much as if something was weighing heavily on her. I had the urge to fix whatever the problem was, but that was impossible to do without her telling me. Hell, I would have asked Maddox to push through her mental barrier, or at least try, but I didn't feel like that was fair to ask, and I would much rather she trust me enough to tell me herself.

Neither of us were extremely talkative individuals by nature. I knew my weaknesses, and opening up about how I felt was very much one of them. I knew what I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to say it in a way that didn't make me either seem like a fucking lunatic or overcontrolling. Especially since I was both of those and didn't want to send Maize packing because of my overdemanding, obsessive personality. Philip was obsessive by nature, but I was starting to wonder if I was picking up some of his shit, because Maize was legitimately always on my mind. I wanted our comfortable silence back so that I could properly spend my time appreciating how fucking good she looked today, a low groan catching in my throat as my cock jumped to attention.

Motherfucker.

Part of me—the part I wasn't showing her—wanted to put her back into oversized sweatpants and a hoodie. Badly. I wasn't lying when I said I needed her by me. After everything that had happened last night, that wasn't optional. So her dressing in something less revealing would have, in some ways, made it easier for me.

Would it really, though? Maize always turned me on. Seriously, it didn't matter if she was in a hoodie and sweatpants or what she was wearing today.

The other part of me couldn't help but trail after her like a goddamn dog, watching the way her long legs and ass looked in tight leather pants with over-the-knee lace-up hunting boots. Or the way her small waist dipped in, the soft flesh the perfect place to hold her as I bent her over and fucked her until she was completely filled with my cum. I mean, hell, even the way her dark hair brushed over her breasts, the slight cleavage creating a magnet for my eyes with each step, was erotic in nature. The woman's body was like a fantasy come to life, and I wanted to lock her in my bedroom to explore it.

It was possible that the night before had me wanting to claim her more than ever. I ran a hand over the back of my neck again, not liking that we didn't understand how to keep her safe. It infuriated me beyond reason that someone thought they had the right to take her from us. To hurt her. I knew my brothers felt the same.

But more than all of that? I was experiencing an emotion that I was very familiar with, but only from other people.

Fear.

I was legitimately afraid of what could happen if Maize was left alone for too long. I was afraid someone was going to take her from here. Afraid that I would lose her, lose whatever this was, before we even had a chance to explore it. I always fought for my family, but with her it felt ten times more raw and real. Instinctively, I knew she was the solution to bringing our family together permanently. She was the complete finish to who we were, and I wanted nothing more than to tell her that. To tell her that her fears weren't needed because she had everything she wanted at her fingertips.

I didn't want to come on too strong, though, and in the small briefing Charm had given me from their training session, I knew she was still working through shit. Which was why I so desperately wanted her to open up to me.

As we neared the classroom, I opened the door, ignoring the students outside as they began to file in. Maize followed me towards the desk, the large amphitheater-like lecture hall filled with benches and tables that looked down on it. My cock hardened further, watching her near my desk, because of course I was immediately imagining bending her over it, which would have been far more interesting than work. That was saying something, considering I actually enjoyed teaching more than I would have originally assumed.

Unfortunately, this class wasn't one of my favorites. It was meant to prepare newly formed teams to go out into the field. All of them were young—like eighteen, if not seventeen—and cocky as hell because they had received their legitimate Red Masques uniform after passing exams this past autumn. Now they would spend the next semester preparing to go into the field this summer. It was a necessary evil, but I found myself feeling a bit anxious about the concept of sending young men out into dangerous situations. It was ridiculous, of course, because I was only twenty-seven, but sometimes I felt far older than that.

Offering Maize the desk chair, I leaned against the surface, waiting for the room to fill up as I watched her guilt-ridden expression. I suppose ‘expression’ wasn’t the right word, though, because it was really just her eyes. They were dark, almost navy, and she bit her lip as she leaned back into the leather chair, crossing her arms to keep to herself, completely lost in thought. It hadn’t happened often, but Maize very much had the tendency to phase out, and while I knew it was her way of coping, it did concern me.

My eyes moved down to the two marks on her collarbone. *Charm and Chait.* I was jealous. I was completely jealous, and I wanted her to mark me. So much so that I had half a mind to fucking ask. Then I could get my mark on her as well. My magic jumped at that concept as I tried to not overthink that too much, knowing that the rabbit hole of possessive thoughts when it came to her was absolutely dangerous.

Maize was the type of woman that men obsessed over.

As in me. I obsessed over her. As did my teammates. If anyone else did, I would conjure up their darkest fears and make them live in an eternity of perpetual torture, making them experience it every single moment of every single day. I didn’t feel guilty about that.

Plus, if I marked her, she would feel more comfortable with me touching her. She wouldn’t have to worry about hurting me, because trust me, she was the only one worrying. I wouldn’t mind in the least if she poisoned me. It may sound cocky, but I knew she would save me, just like I would her. I wouldn’t ever question putting my life on the line for her. It was a natural instinct that I was starting to understand very much had to do with our tentative mating bond.

I closed the door after a minute or so, the tall ceilings echoing with voices as Maize watched me walk back to the desk. I crouched down and pulled out some papers from the bottom drawer before standing, several eyes snapping away from where they had been focused on Maize. We needed to start this exam so they could stop fucking looking at her.

I was jealous of students ten years younger than myself for looking at her… this was a problem. Although, to be fair, Maize was closer in age to them than I was, so I had a right to be paranoid about their thoughts. Something I normally didn’t care about but was very much affecting me currently. I bet it drove Maddox crazy. And Charm, having to hear their desires.

“Pass the exam back,” I said as I handed out several piles to the front row. “Once you are done, bring it up front and you are good to go.” Nods and murmured confirmation met my instructions as I made it back to the desk and leaned against it, looking down at her, my back to the classroom. Those stunning eyes finally met mine.

“Baby,” I said, watching her eyes lighten slightly. “What is going on?”

She blinked, her teeth biting down on her lip slightly as a slight vulnerability and fear tugged on our bond, making me all that much more upset. I tried to not rush her and breathed a bit of a sigh of relief when I saw her decide to just tell me. Which was good, because I was pushy and had planned on getting it out of her one way or another. This was much better.

“My familiars told me something upsetting.” Maize looked to the ceiling and sighed. “I don’t know how to handle it or who to tell.”

Me. You tell me, baby.

I honestly didn’t think I would ever fully be used to Maize’s direct answers to questions, and I would never stop loving it. I appreciated it more than she would probably ever realize, so I didn’t hesitate to grip her chin gently, tilting it down so that her eyes met mine. I hated the guilt I saw there.

“What did they say?”

Maize opened her plush lips to tell me when a sound from the room had her eyes darting over my shoulder. “Afterwards?” she suggested. “I don’t think right now is a good time.”

Before I could respond, there was a small knock, making me turn towards the heavy wooden door. I arched a brow, seeing Cirdan through the small window as I looked at the clock hanging on the wall. Early for him to be up, if we were being honest. I smoothed a piece of Maize’s hair between my fingers as I walked towards the door, sticking my head out and offering the man a curious look.

Cirdan was odd. Not odd as in untrustworthy, just in the way that three hundred year-old witches tended to be. His normally indifferent expression was filled with tension and something I didn’t fully understand.

“We have him in an interrogation room,” Cirdan said. “The boy’s uncle.”

I let out a knowing hum. “I don’t have a class after this, Maize and I will head down there following—”

“I wouldn’t bring her,” he offered honestly. “The shit he’s spewing is… it would probably upset her.”

Infuriate her? Possibly. I wasn’t sure it would upset her, though. Looking back at Maize, I watched her stand up and make her way towards me, my eyes running over the burdened look in her gaze. He was right—she didn’t need to hear that bullshit today.

“What’s going on?” she asked, looking cautious. We stepped into the hall so we could speak without being overheard.

“David’s uncle has been brought here. I’m going to go down and pay him a visit.” I decided it was better to ask her than to assume. “Do you want to come with? Apparently he’s being a piece of shit.”

Her lips pressed into a slight smile. “Not particularly, especially if I am going to have to listen to him say shit that I can’t hurt him for.” My smile grew dangerous at that prospect, her eyes lighting with amusement. A door opened as Charm walked out of his classroom, students exiting after him.

“Charm, can you finish up this exam with Maize?” I asked, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I need to go with Cirdan.”

Charm’s eyes lit up. “They brought him in?”

I nodded, and he walked into the classroom, tugging Maize with him as I followed Cirdan, not bothering to warn the others. Charm would let them know. I had no doubt they would, at some point, end up down there. My thoughts tugged slightly on the fact that Maize had yet to tell me what was bothering her, but when I got back, it would be my first priority. Honestly, if it wasn’t for Maize’s safety, I would have said this shit could have waited.

“She’s your mate? The Dark Fae?” Cirdan clarified, sounding distantly curious. I didn’t fully believe that he was that detached, though. There was a weird energy to him that confused me. I had a feeling that he wasn’t telling me everything about the man we were going to see.

“Yes, she’s ours,” I hummed as he nodded in understanding. The two of us didn’t bother with small talk as we jogged down four flights, finally coming to a set of dark doors that led further into the building. The several floors that were underground were a rather complex maze of cells and interrogation rooms that students weren’t allowed to access.

“What’s his name?”

“Commander Richard Flank.”

I recognized the name, and not for any positive reason. Nor was it due to his reputation, like how some of us were feared. No. He was just a biased

piece of shit. He was a mage and had aligned himself pretty heavily with a previous mage representative who didn't believe mages should ever be made, only born. It made sense why he was predisposed to bias, and I was surprised he had managed to stay in SE for an entire extra year, considering the regime change.

"And his daughter," Cirdan bit out.

I froze before opening the door into the room that he—and apparently *she*— was being kept in. The two guards outside were quiet and kept their gaze forward. "His daughter is here?"

"Yes." Cirdan's jaw tensed, something odd flashing across his face. "She's trying to take blame for her father's sudden… loss of clarity. Says she used a spell on him. I have no doubt the woman knows spell casting, but she didn't put the spell on Richard that is causing him to act like this."

"Act like what?" I demanded as Cirdan opened the door. Immediately, the scent of blood filled the space, and my eyes widened at the sight in front of me. The rooms were basic, and there was a place on the floor for each 'guest' to be chained by the ankle while sitting at a long silver table with two chairs. Except, instead of sitting at the table, a large man that I was betting was the commander was hitting his head into the wall again and again, mumbling under his breath.

Ah, someone fucked with his head.

"Same level of dark magic as before," Cirdan explained in a quiet voice. "Can't remember a thing, doesn't even admit to having a nephew or daughter."

My eyes moved to a young girl, maybe nineteen, that sat at the silver table, staring straight ahead. I would have never assumed that she was anything but bored if I couldn't smell the fear drifting off her. I narrowed my gaze as I walked towards the table, Cirdan's chest producing a low rumble. I turned and offered him a look.

"Can you tell the guards outside to get Maddox?" I requested. Cirdan looked at the girl before making his way towards the door. Ignoring Richard for the moment, I sat in front of the girl as a pair of clear green eyes met mine, completely void of emotion. It was an expression well mastered, and if I had to assume, hadn't developed for a positive reason.

"What's wrong with your father?"

Her gaze shifted to Cirdan as he stood behind me, leaning against the wall, a flash of something crawling through her gaze before she offered me

a dismissive answer. “I already told *him* what happened. I used a spell to remove his memories, that way he is of no use to you.”

Liar. Not only had she not used the spell, but I couldn’t fathom why she was covering for not only her cousin, but her father. The same father that had no doubt left the bruises that covered her throat, ones that were so stark I wondered how she was able to talk correctly.

“I don’t believe you.” Fear saturated the air as she swallowed, her eyes darting to Cirdan again, her pulse somewhat slowing. Interesting.

“Cirdan, come sit with me,” I suggested, and he was there… immediately.

“What’s your name?”

The girl answered my question while looking at Cirdan. “Brielle.”

I tilted my head. “And what type of spell did you use on your father?”

“Why would I tell either of you that?”

“Because you don’t know,” Cirdan responded. “Because there is no way in hell that you cast that spell.”

The girl snarled, her lip pulling back slightly. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

Cirdan laughed as my eyes moved between the two of them curiously, her father becoming far less interesting than whatever this was. I was somewhat hoping Maddox could also tell me if I was imagining whatever this shit was between them. Whenever he showed up. Where the fuck was he?

“I know that you aren’t using dark spell casting, little girl,” he said, his tone chilling. “Especially not with how strong your mage magic is. They would counteract one another.”

Her jaw clicked as she looked down at the table. “Can you just let him go? My father doesn’t know anything.”

“Unfortunately, I disagree. I think he knows exactly where your cousin David is,” I leveled. “My question is, do you?”

A weird surge of anger flashed in her eyes, but she kept her face neutral. “I don’t interact with David.”

Yeah, there was definitely something going on here.

The door opened as Maddox strolled in, his stride stopping as he took in the room, searching the space with interest before landing on the girl’s father. Knowing what I was going to ask, he looked back at me.

“His memory has been wiped completely,” Maddox said as he pulled up a chair and sat on my other side, facing the girl. “And I’m assuming she’s saying she’s responsible for it?”

“I am.” Her voice was shaking, and I felt a surge of guilt. It was clear this kid was caught up in some bullshit.

“No, you’re not.” Maddox’s magic wrapped around the space as the girl shrank in her chair. Cirdan tensed next to me, looking down at the table as if he was restraining himself. I looked back at Maddox, who just smirked slightly but didn’t say anything.

“He can either pull the memory out of you, or you can tell us what you know,” I offered. “I know you got pulled into this shit unwillingly, and whoever removed his memories and not yours left you vulnerable and in a really shit position.”

Her magic flared as the table underneath us shook slightly before tears started to trail down her cheeks. Fuck. Maybe we should have had Maize come with. I just felt bad for the kid. Cirdan was there then, literally around the table, and crouching down next to her. I could see his mouth moving, but it was almost as if his words were a guise, because I couldn’t understand them for the life of me. Brielle didn’t seem to suffer the same issue, her eyes going wide as she swallowed nervously before offering him a long look.

Finally, she nodded and looked back at us.

“I wasn’t lying about David. I don’t interact with him,” she whispered, her face paling. “He’s a bastard, and so is my father. I don’t know a lot, but last night, David showed up and did something to change Richard. He told me that if I didn’t tell everyone I did it… he would come back and kill my little sisters.”

“Where are your sisters?” Cirdan demanded.

“At home by themselves.” The girl’s expression turned furious. “I have to get back to them. Someone has to get back to them.”

Cirdan was up by the door and speaking to the guards as I let him do whatever it was he thought was the right move. Half the time, leading was about letting others figure it out, and I had a feeling he had a far more vested interest in the girl than Maddox or I. I looked back at her as she watched Cirdan with an affectionate look. Fascinating.

“What do you know about how they feel regarding the Dark Fae?”

“Everyone in my family hates them,” she answered, confused. “Why?”

“She doesn’t know anything else,” Maddox assured.

Running a hand over my face, I looked at her father before addressing her again. “Where is your mother?”

Brielle flinched slightly as a haunted shadow came over her face. “Died a while ago. It’s just been the four of us.”

“He won’t be able to provide for you, your father,” I pointed out. “I can let you go home, or you and your sisters can join the Academy.”

Her eyes lit up before darkening. “Is it like the SE?”

“No,” Maddox responded, “you won’t have to worry about that here. And if that happens, you won’t be the one punished for it.”

I didn’t understand his comment, but her fear disappeared as Cirdan came to sit down.

“It’s all men here,” Cirdan bit out quietly, my smile harder to repress.

“She can have a room up on the commander’s floor. Maize will probably love the opportunity to train someone,” I urged, especially since none of us were going to let the guys around her. Not because of her—she was more than capable—we were just selfish fucks.

“What will happen to him?” Birelle asked, looking over at Richard with a sneer.

“He will stay in one of the cells until we figure out what to do next,” I assured her, wondering if maybe David’s family, his mom or father, knew more.

“Both dead,” Maddox explained. “Lived with them until the academy.”

Brielle seemed to shrink at that as Cirdan snarled, making me wonder what the story was there. Feeling somewhat exhausted and wanting to see my mate, I stood and nodded. “We can take you up to the dorm now. Cirdan, I’m assuming you’re coming with?”

His eyes flickered over her before they went to Richard, a flash of something truly dangerous crossing his gaze. “I want a moment with Richard.”

Maddox chuckled as I handed a key to Brielle. She reached down to unhook her ankle and stood up, shakily handing me back the key. I motioned towards the door for her to come with us, but she paused for a moment before following, looking back at Cirdan with curiosity.

Once we were outside, I heard the scream that should have terrified the girl next to us, but instead of running like I’d expect, her back hit the wall. She seemed to be waiting. I looked to Maddox, who just shrugged. Another

scream escaped the room, and her smile grew as the door opened again and Cirdan walked out, his face and chest covered in blood. His expression was blank as he walked to Brielle.

“Want to see your room?”

She flashed him a smile and took his hand, the two of them walking ahead. I inhaled, shaking my head as Maddox offered me an amused look. Once they were far enough ahead of us, I finally looked at Maddox.

“I’m assuming I’m missing a ton.”

“She’s spent most of her life being captive, in some form or another.” Maddox shook his head. “Her own father, David when they were younger, and some of the SE higher-ups… most of whom are gone now anyway…”

I felt bile rise in my throat because I didn’t have to guess how that sentence ended.

“Valerio? Maddox?” Maize’s voice filled the space as she and Charm turned the corner, nearly barrelling into Cirdan and Brielle.

“Hey, baby.” I flashed her a smile. “Interested in showing Brielle the commander suite she and her sisters will be staying in?”

My mate blinked before looking down at Brielle, who was tightening her hold on Cirdan while staring at Maize in awe. Maize flashed an authentic smile and nodded, allowing us to continue on our way. Neither she nor Charm asked what was going on, but when I finally put my arm around her, I spoke.

“Want to go out riding, get some fresh air after?”

“Yeah,” she nodded in understanding.

“Holy shit,” Maize murmured. She was riding next to me, both of our horses making their way through a thickly forested patch as early afternoon rain misted the air. “So what the hell is going on with her and Cirdan? Also, does that mean I get to train her and her sisters? Fuck. Is it bad that I’m glad he killed her father? What an absolute piece of shit.”

I couldn’t help but smile at how passionate her voice became when talking about the situation. I hadn’t expected it, but I also hadn’t been surprised when she’d taken an instant liking to Brielle and her two little

sisters. They'd been settled into a large suite on the commander floor with its own kitchen and living space, usually reserved for high-ranking visitors. I wasn't very worried about any of those coming along, and if they did, they would probably stay in the castle.

"Maddox said her father deserved it," I added. Not that there was an opportunity for anything different. I hadn't expected Cirdan to kill the man, but I also didn't disagree with the tactic, especially if he was as bad as I assumed. No child should have to grow up like that, and unfortunately, the two young girls that had arrived only an hour ago had the same weight and shadow despite being only fifteen and twelve.

"Do she and Cirdan know one another?" Maize asked curiously, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "I mean, he literally wouldn't let go of her hand."

And still hasn't, no doubt. I didn't bother trying to tell him to leave Brielle to get settled. He'd at least showered the blood off of himself before the younglings arrived, so that was enough for me. Plus, as I predicted, the young woman was almost twenty and seemed to want him around. Something that only seemed to encourage the crazy look in Cirdan's eye, so whether that was a good thing or not was very much up for debate.

"This was their first time meeting," I answered as I considered that maybe the next time we came out here, we could go hunting. I knew she had that bow and arrow from Gray she'd yet to use. My smile grew, knowing how fun that would be. My naturalistic mage magic usually didn't take the forefront of my thoughts, but whenever I was out in nature, I was far more connected.

"Fascinating," she mumbled. "Well, at least we know it's David." I saw that look of guilt flash through her gaze again, and I remembered the conversation we were supposed to have before.

"We never talked about before," I nudged. "What your familiars said?" I could see the wheels turning in her complex, complicated mind, and I was tempted to pull our horses to a stop just so we could talk face to face instead of walking side by side. I didn't though. Sometimes it was easier to be doing shit while talking, or at least that was how I worked. What I did know for sure? She had no reason to feel guilty, but I couldn't tell her that until she told me what was going on.

"How does the academy work?" she asked randomly, my chest squeezing at the obvious caution there. Maize knew I wasn't going to let it

go, but for the moment, I answered her question, wondering if she needed to warm up to it.

“You mean class schedule? When they start? When they form teams?”

Thunder rumbling in the distance, and she leaned forward on her horse slightly. My eyes trailed to her arched back and ass, my mouth watering to bite down on the soft skin there. Shaking my head at myself, I tried to remove the image of her bent over my bed with her ass up in the air. Fuck. Now was not the time for that.

“Sure.” She shrugged, her eyes darting to my expression as she explained, “I’m just worried about Brielle and her sisters. I never had any formal schooling, the Obsidian Butterflies taught me everything I needed to know. So did the private tutors my father hired… before he decided he wanted to drain me of power and kill me.” A shadow filled her gaze, remembering something unpleasant that I wasn’t positive had to do with her father.

Pulling my horse to a stop, I dismounted and walked over to hers, helping her down as she offered me a curious look. Once she was on solid ground, I wrapped her in a hug, not really having a good reason to do so besides wanting to feel her body against mine.

A soft sound broke from her throat as she pulled back, looking confused despite the blush on her cheeks. I knew she would probably deny it, but the more Maize let down her emotions, the more expressive she became. Or, it was possible that it was just far more noticeable because I was becoming increasingly focused on her.

“Technically, you can join the academy at any time, but most do around thirteen or fourteen, when they receive their blood ink tattoos. I believe both of the younger girls have received theirs already, so they should be able to fit into classes fairly easily.” I tilted my head, frowning. “I do worry about the lack of women here, because being a trailblazer is never easy, so we will have to keep an eye on that. I suspect Cirdan will do so anyway. As for Brielle, it would make sense for her to be placed on an experienced team that isn’t out in the field, but instead here on training. I don’t think she will have issues catching up.”

“Why not Cirdan’s team?” Maize mused.

My smile grew as I looked down at her. “Playing matchmaker?”

“As if I need to,” she scoffed. “Just saving you the argument when Cirdan refuses to let her onto any other team.”

I chuckled, because she wasn't wrong, but…

"Cirdan's team is different, and I'm not sure they are all that balanced. Not that we have any right to talk, but the entire group of them come from very… diverse backgrounds. They aren't technically part of the Red Masques, they are more like private mercenaries or contractors that have volunteered to help us. For whatever reason, they need to be in the area, and considering the group of them have been working together for a few hundred years, we weren't going to say no to their help. But adding someone onto their team? That could be difficult."

Maize nodded in understanding before asking a different question. "The blood ink tattoos, those are the runes tattooed on them if they are mages, right?"

"Exactly." I nodded. "Not everyone here is a mage, but the majority are for sure. The others tend to join SE because the mage community first started the Red Masques. SE training starts at a young age as well, around the same time, and then around seventeen or eighteen they are assigned teams and go out into the field, similar to the young men in my class today."

"So everyone goes into the field?" She frowned.

"Not everyone. Some stay, like your… friend," I grunt the word, "Alexander. He is staying here."

Her smile grew. "Nice to hear you say I have friends, Valerio."

I let out a low rumble. "Don't remind me. I don't like you around other men."

"Good thing you are literally *always* around," she teased and then ran a hand over her horse's coat gently. My brain sparked at the concept of getting her a horse.

When was her birthday? I wasn't good at romantic or grand gestures, but I felt like something like a horse would be a thing Maize appreciated. I could be crazy though. Maybe Chait would be better at taking the lead on shit like this.

"Why did you guys decide to stay here?"

"We didn't at the start," I explained softly. "When the academy was established, we were in the field a lot, but Commander Edwin eventually wanted to start training sooner before the field, and we took up the calling for it. I prefer it, to be honest, especially long-term. Allows us to focus on what's important."

Maize blushed at something as I kissed her fingers, wondering if she realized I felt that way because I wouldn't have met her if I hadn't been here. "Plus, our magic is a bunch of hybrid bullshit, so it makes it good for teaching since we know what is normal and not normal in the least."

Her fingers brushed against mine. "Charm and I were training earlier, and I let him use his magic on me… it was intense."

My jaw clenched as I saw pain flash in her gaze. "You don't have to go through that, Maize. I know Charm is an ass, but you don't need to prove anything to him."

"I know," she whispered. "He's not wrong about being able to fight offensively. It feels almost impossible, and I have no idea why."

Because you aren't facing an actual threat. She never would again. Although, after last night, I wasn't positive I had the right or confidence to say that.

"You don't need to fight anymore," I insisted and pulled her completely against me. "Just trust us."

"I do trust you." She blinked, seeming surprised, and then swallowed. "But fighting is all I've done for the past four years, Valerio. I'm not sure something like that can just go away, you know?"

I did. I understood that far better than she probably even realized. Silence filled the space as I held her, thunder rumbling closer, as I finally cupped her jaw and looked down on her face. I saw the reality of her being out of time flash across her face.

"Maize, baby, you can't keep avoiding it."

A small puff of air escaped her lips as a sadness filtered through her gaze, a resignation I didn't like at fucking all. "I… I let my familiars out, wanting to ask them about last night… I thought maybe we would be able to get some insight on what happened. Valerio, they said that I woke up and put the spell on Charm and Philip myself, the one meant to kill them. I don't understand why I would do that. I don't remember anything, I would never want to kill them."

Ah, that would explain the guilt.

Her voice caught as horror filled her face, making me feel guilty for not immediately speaking as she continued, "I would never do that, Valerio. Ever. I mean, clearly I guess I did, but never on purpose. I would never want to hurt them."

I seared my lips to hers, to not only taste her, but to calm her, kissing her deeply until she melted fully into me. Then I spoke against her lips. “Cirdan explained that would probably be the case because there was no direct evidence of anyone entering the room. Someone compelled you to do it, Maize. No one thinks you would hurt one of us on purpose. I know you, Maize and that’s not you. Don’t let this eat you up, baby.”

“But what if I hurt one of you, kill one of you, and I’m not there to save you?” She was panicking, and I had no idea how to stop it except to soothe her physically. This was what I meant when I told Charm I was horrible with this shit. I wanted to be so much better, and I wanted to stop potentially fucking this up.

“You said you trust me, right?” I asked, and she nodded. “Then trust that I won’t let that happen. It’s a learning curve, but your power is a part of you, Maize. We will take each day as it comes. We’re your mates, it wouldn’t make sense for the Maker to assign you mates that couldn’t keep you and themselves alive.”

Relief flooded her gaze as she let out a shaky breath. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely.” I backed her up against a nearby tree, leaving the horses on the path as I dipped my head, offering her a soft look. “But I’m glad you told me. Don’t ever be afraid of telling me anything, okay?”

My heart stuttered to a stop as warmth filled her eyes, loving how she was looking at me. “I suck at this shit.”

“I disagree.” I rubbed my nose against hers as a small noise broke from her throat. Her hand gripped my shirt as I nipped at her bottom lip, a moan breaking from her mouth as my fingers brushed down her waist and sunk against her curved hips.

“Valerio,” she whispered as I kissed along her neck. I nipped the skin there as she squirmed against me, her nails biting into my skin as I hissed, loving the feel of her mark on me.

“I’m jealous,” I admitted softly, and her eyes widened. “Jealous that you marked Chait.”

“I poisoned him,” she disagreed, though her eyes flared with excitement at what I was saying. I knew her magic wanted to mark us. The only one stopping the process was Maize because she thought it was wrong or monstrous. But there could never be anything wrong with Maize’s magic because Maize herself was perfect.

“*Marked him*,” I corrected. “Just because your magic does it more violently doesn’t take away from the meaning behind it.”

“Talking about that,” she whispered, “I’m surprised that we’ve been able to be apart for this long.”

“They are already in the stable waiting.” I smiled against her neck, pulling back to brush my lips against her own. “Which reminds me, we need to head back. We have that meeting before dinner with the entire academy.”

“Ah, that makes— Oh shit!” She moaned as I traced my lips down her neck and onto her cleavage, desperately wanting to rip off her shirt so that I could taste her skin again. I could practically smell how fucking good she would taste, and my fingers brushed against the apex of her thighs as she squirmed against me, letting out a moan of my name.

Music to my fucking ears.

The things I wanted to do to this woman were not healthy. When I let my magic out, her fear sparked in the air, but I knew it was a reflexive response and not because of what I was doing. There was a subtle difference, and one that was really fucking important to me. When Maize was feeling real fear, everything around her turned cold, icy. But when she was feeling nervous and excited, the intoxicating mixture between us right now where she wasn’t sure what I would do, everything around her was molten hot.

I think I fell in love with her when she let out a moan, her pulse spiking as I pulled her arms above her head, running my nose against her pulse. I was curious how far she would let me take this. How far she would let my magic play with hers, because we had already branded her as ours. I just wanted to know if she understood what that meant.

“For fuck’s sake,” Charm’s disgruntled voice echoed at the end of the path, “I can literally feel that fucking shit from here. I can’t think straight if you keep pulling that shit, Valerio, and now you expect me to sit through a goddamn meeting?”

Maize let out a peal of laughter as I let her straighten fully, her face pink as I ran my fingers over her soft body, not feeling bad in the least.

“I’m not apologizing for that,” I pointed out.

“Never assumed you would, asshole.” Charm chuckled.

“Do we have to do this meeting?” Maize asked, her eyes wide and pleading.

My lips kicked up, thinking of the very clear statement I planned on making tonight. “Trust me baby, it won’t be that bad.”

For her.

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CHAPTER 7

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MAIZE

Valerio was right, it wasn't bad… *for me.*

In fact, outside of my boys and a few select individuals, I seemed to be the only one that wasn't uncomfortable. I mean, I should have been for sure—this wasn't gaining me any friends—but instead I just found Valerio's actions… attractive. Like, *really* hot.

So much so that I was semi-distracted from what he was actually saying and focused on the way he stood at the front of the room, scaring the living shit out of the massive amount of academy students hanging on his every word. His magic vibrated through the air threateningly, and it was extremely easy for me to understand why he'd been chosen for this job. He was a natural leader and intrinsically fantastic at scaring people enough to stay in line. I shouldn't have found it so hot that he was threatening people in my honor.

I mean, he was using a bit more tact than that. After explaining what had happened, he was now talking about the punishments involved in being part of something like that, along with the restrictions on curfew and shit until it was handled.

Oddly enough, without David and his friends—who I'd yet to see since dinner last night—I felt a lifting of tension and I wondered if I'd been imagining the animosity or if they were just scared to express it now. There were still some dirty looks being thrown my way, but more than anything it was curiosity. Probably because they wanted to know if their commander was being insane. Hotly insane.

The teams that lined the sides of the room didn't appear terrified in any way, but they seemed to agree with Valerio, their eyes focused on the

expressions of those sitting in the crowd. I knew these weren't all the teams, so maybe they were those that weren't in the field? For a place I lived in, I still felt like I knew very little about it.

Maybe I would ask the Queen's sister, Vegas. She probably had that knowledge, and anything she didn't know she could ask Commander Edwin. My lips tweaked up, knowing that it would probably piss off my mates if I chose to ask someone else rather than them. I didn't feel guilty, though. They were very distracting. How was I supposed to focus on the important questions when they were being all handsome and shit?

Leaning back in my chair, my eyes moved down to the new ensemble I was wearing, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the notion of being given a commander's outfit by my mates. I didn't deserve to wear one. I wanted to, though. I wanted to be a part of this community, not for myself, but rather because I knew my mates loved it. My issue? I wasn't positive the community wanted me.

Like my mates', the "casual" commander's outfit consisted of dark leather pants and boots, which I luckily already had since they didn't regularly make women's uniforms here. The top, though, I'd found in the smallest size, and it actually fit rather comfortably. The dark red and black tunic made of leather and a brocade pattern wrapped around tightly at my waist, buttoning with smooth silk clasps. It was a stunning piece, and the only complaint I had was that the sleeves were a bit long on me, the black material falling to mid-palm. The guys absolutely loved it… meaning they had lost their shit over it and I'd tried my best to not feel embarrassed or overwhelmed by their easy move to integrate me into their lives.

I was also learning that it was a bit of a stamp. A stamp that said 'she's ours,' because I was literally the only one besides them wearing it. Not that I needed that, considering Philip, who was sitting next to me at the long commander's table behind Valerio, had taken to putting his arm around the back of my chair. That would have been enough to draw attention, and the way he kept putting his head against my shoulder and saying shit to make me smile only made it worse. I couldn't not smile at the man, and Zed on my other side kept drawing patterns on my thigh, making my face blush.

It seemed my men found this meeting amusing, as most of them were talking quietly and smiling as the students were put in their place by Valerio. My magic sparked possessively at the thought of his name. We had a big crush on Valerio, and it was one hundred percent not going anywhere.

I think I had realized how bad it was when he didn't blink twice about trusting me even after explaining what my familiars told me about last night. More so, he had been pissed for me, explaining to the group the position I'd been put into. I had expected Philip to be upset and Charm to maybe spout some bullshit, but instead both were furious that someone had the ability to use that type of magic on me.

The feeling of acceptance when they'd gotten defensive over me had left me feeling warm and loved, which were two things I'd rarely felt in my life. That was before the anger took over, my magic furious that someone had not only done that to us but also made our mates upset. I shook my head, trying to clear the anger from my thoughts, knowing it wouldn't do any good right now.

Unfortunately, a small shifting of movement to the left of Zed had my anger sparking again. Not at who was there, but at what they had gone through. *Brielle and her sisters.* The three of them sat back slightly from everyone else, silent as they watched Valerio with large eyes. The two younger girls seemed far more afraid than Brielle, who just looked cautious. When she turned to catch my eye, I offered her a small smile, which she returned before her youngest sister pulled on her arm, drawing her attention back.

Mine moved to the man who leaned against the wall near them, his focus completely on Brielle, making me wonder if Cirdan was in fact a threat to her. Somehow I didn't think so… but then what did he want? I found myself feeling defensive over them because I could tell that they had been through some shit, and if the combination of old and new bruises on their skin told me anything, it was that they'd been hurt by the hand of someone close to them. My lips almost peeled back into a snarl at the haunted shadows on the two younger girls as well. I was glad Cirdan had killed their father once he was deemed unhelpful. Motherfucker didn't deserve to live.

It didn't take away from the fact that Cirdan was very much a predator, and a powerful one. The way he shifted every time Brielle moved had me wondering if she realized just how much he was watching her. Despite looking like prey, with large green eyes, red hair, and a small stature, I had a feeling the woman was anything but defenseless. No, there was a stubborn and willful set to her entire demeanor that I recognized was from surviving

shit that should have killed her. I had no doubt the woman was capable of protecting herself, but I was glad she had decided to come here.

I had no doubt that she would find her place here, and not just because of Cirdan.

When Valerio had told me that the team he was part of was different… I hadn't fully understood what he was saying. Now I did, and it didn't take a genius to see that difference loud and clear. Most of the Red Masques teams had an edge to them—a bit insane, if we were being honest—with a love for violence. This team, though? They just seemed dark. Filled with darkness and a cold, indifferent violence that seemed to surround them like hard, sharp blades that no doubt formed the scars on their body. Not only were they physically massive, but there was no chaotic edge to their magic, nothing to grip onto. There was just pure violence and terror that seemed to radiate from them. Which was why I should have been concerned with the way all of their gazes continued to stray to Brielle. I had been around bad men, and normally I would have told her to get the fuck away from this place as fast as she could, because they didn't seem like the type of men whose attention you wanted to attract. Ever.

But that was what made Brielle different and would probably sentence her to their attention. I watched as she looked up, meeting the largest one's gaze, a jagged scar streaking down his face making him look all the more angry. Instead of looking away, a smile pulled at her lips before she winked and looked back down at her sister. I shook my head and inhaled, grabbing a glass of wine in front of me and taking a slow sip. That right there was night and day, folks, and I was absolutely not one to judge.

"She will be fine," Zed assured me quietly, his eyes fully focused on my face. "They…" I could tell he wanted to say something more assuring but also didn't want to lie. I squeezed his hand, and he ran his lips across my knuckles before seeming to come up with something.

"Maddox has been keeping tabs on their thoughts, and Charm on their intentions," he said as I looked down the table at the other two men. "If there was a real danger, they would have intercepted it. We take care of our own here. They don't want to hurt her."

My lips kicked up into a smile. "I don't think they want to hurt her, and that may be the problem."

Zed chuckled softly. "Even the worst monsters deserve love, angel."

My chest warmed at that as I nodded, because he was right.

Suddenly, everyone in the room was standing and exiting, voices rising in the hall despite the tension and fear in the room. Valerio watched them with speculation before turning back towards me and flashing a smile. My cheeks warmed, because damn him, he shouldn't be allowed to smile. His eyes were lit with amusement and joy, making me know he'd enjoyed freaking them out far too much.

"They will probably be scared to even pass me in the halls now," I pointed out to the man as a possessive flare filled his gaze.

"Good," Cannon replied, making Maddox chuckle.

As we stood, I realized that Brielle and her sisters were already making their way towards the exit… with several people in tow. I shook my head and then considered asking Valerio if I could make a schedule to train with them. I missed having sparring partners, and as fun as it was to fight with men, I liked the idea of teaching women to fight. It felt far more important. You couldn't protect the people you loved if you couldn't protect yourself.

"I'm hungry," I said. Seven heads snapped my way, making me blush as I realized it was possibly the first time I'd ever stated that out loud. I didn't usually voice my wants or needs, like ever, so I was somewhat surprised when it came out of my mouth. Not as surprised as I was when Cannon literally picked me up, throwing me over his shoulder, his hands on the back of my legs. I felt a surge of pride that I hadn't even worried about my magic with his quick movements.

I really was curious where we were going, though.

"Isn't dinner soon? I can just wait," I pointed out, knowing the others were following.

"I have a way better idea." His voice was filled with a level of happiness I hadn't expected, and I couldn't tell if it was due to his idea or if he was legitimately excited about food. I tried to push off his back but let out a small sound as his massive hand tightened on my thigh, his chest releasing a rumble. I tried to look up, but I just saw the boots of the others following us as I finally gave into whatever plan he had.

"Shit, you didn't say we were going outside," I growled, a chill rolling over my skin as we stepped out of the academy. The ground was covered in melting snow, and I found my nose scrunching at the weird mixture of mud and snow that it was creating. I hated that. Like, give me rain. Give me snow. Not this weird in-between bullshit.

“Is there even food there, Cannon?” Valerio asked curiously, his voice filled with amusement and slight surprise.

“Should be.” Cannon shrugged. “Told them that we needed it prepared by tomorrow, so if not, someone is doing extra training.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“I think they were surprised that we finally wanted to use it,” Chait pointed out, his voice warming my chest.

“It also makes sense logistically,” Cannon mumbled. “One entrance and one exit, plus all the wards have been reaffirmed.”

“Cannon!” I tapped his head, reaching back. “For the love of the Maker, can you please tell me what in the hell—” I slid down Cannon’s body and turned sharply, coming to a complete halt, my eyes going wide.

Woah. Alright, I expected a lot, but not this.

My mouth opened and closed as I looked around, realizing that we were in the back of the academy, where there were a range of different types of houses that were fit for the Red Masques teams. Some were large, some smaller, but all of them had this stunning modern design that you would have never expected behind such a gothic structure. My gaze roamed the house in front of us, the pine covering the outside of it almost making it appear as if it was a massive tree, the glass allowing for a straight shot through the house, showing off a cozy living room and extensive kitchen. My eyes traveled upwards, realizing that it was two stories, if not three, in height. Holy crap. It was gorgeous.

“This is stunning,” I said honestly. “But why are we here?”

“We never moved out of the dorms because it was easier for classes,” Valerio explained as Cannon put his chin on top of my head, “but we always had this house as an option.”

“But we decided,” Philip added, his voice light and filled with amusement, “that it would be easier to move all of us in here from now on, especially since the security is easier to monitor with less people around and less exits.”

I swallowed, feeling a weird spark of hope and insecurity. “So you guys are moving here?”

“No, *we* are moving here.” Zed flashed me a smile and a wink.

“We aren’t asking,” Charm pointed out, walking forward towards the path, amusement radiating through the bond as I realized he found this hilarious.

“You are just telling me that I am moving in with you?” I teased.

“Isn’t that fun?” Chait teased, following Charm as I leaned back into Cannon, Valerio staying with us as Zed, Maddox, and Philip followed towards the house.

“Do you like it?” Cannon asked softly.

“It’s gorgeous.” I looked at both of them and smiled. “Are you sure you want to move in together… I mean, I know with the dorms it’s different—Cannon!”

I was back over his shoulder as Valerio offered me an amused look, shrugging as if he had no control over the actions of the man in question. I found my entire body warming as Cannon finally set me down and I looked around my new… home? Holy shit.

The entire structure was lifted slightly so that stone stairs took us up towards the large dark door that closed behind us silently. I pulled off my boots, not wanting to track mud through such expensive dark wood flooring. The purposefully worn texture had knots in it that matched the beams that covered all of the ceilings, making it feel like you were actually in the woods. In front of us was a staircase, splitting the bottom floor into two sides, one being the living room and kitchen, the other being a sunken den and what appeared to be a bathroom in the far back of the space. It was masculine, cozy, and had me feeling right at home despite the modern luxuries.

“You were right!” Chait called. “They did already stock it with food.”

Cannon chuckled and gently pulled my hand as we walked up the stairs, my eyes crawling over each and every detail, loving the mix of soft material and leather. It was clear they hadn’t lived here before, and something about that made it feel special. I was also somewhat excited to see what everyone’s stuff looked like spread throughout the house.

“Holy doors!” I cursed because we entered right into a massive lounge area on top, huge glass windows showing off the academy’s snowy landscape to the front and a dark, thick, forested landscape to the back. On either side, though? Four large doors—eight total—that I had to assume belonged to bedrooms. I hadn’t been lying, it was a shocking amount of doors.

Cannon led me towards a door on the far left side of the house that looked out on the forested landscape.

“This is your room,” he explained, opening the door. My heart stilled, tears threatening to pull at my eyes. I stepped into the space and instantly fell in love, which is saying something. The carpet underneath my feet was soft and plush, a pale cream color, and the ceiling matched the walls in the same hue, contrasted by the dark beams. A massive bed sat in the center of the room, with dark blue sheets that looked almost velvet to the touch. I knew there were other things to look at, but instead I found myself walking towards the bed that was far larger than any bed had a right to be. I offered Cannon a curious look as he just offered me a reckless, challenging smile.

Bastard wanted me to ask about the bed.

I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes. “This is a large bed, Cannon.”

“Is it?” He offered an innocent look at the double king-size bed before casting me a smile. “It was the only size I could get on such short notice.”

My laugh was authentic as I wrapped my arms around his waist. “I’m sure they had a custom-size bed that just happened to be available.”

Cannon’s chest rumbled. “I may have started considering it after I met you. Possibly, maybe, put in an order just in case. I don’t like having to sleep in a different room than you.”

“Right after you met me?” I mused.

“Maize, I could barely keep it together that first day I met you,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “I’d blame my wolf, but it’s not just that. Fuck. I don’t think I’ve ever been as scared as I was last night. I thought I’d lost you.”

Looking up at him, I cupped his jaw, seeing the genuine affection there. “I don’t like that I keep putting you guys in danger. Whatever we need to do to fix this, I’ll do. I can’t handle the idea of you being hurt because you were trying to keep me safe.”

It was honest, and my face was heating as he finally smiled.

“Dinner is almost ready!” Charm called, walking past the room, his eyes moving to the bed before he chuckled. My body heated as Cannon let out a low rumble. I cast him a small smirk as I slipped from the room, his body almost instantly catching up to me. I let out a small, totally not-a-giggle laugh as he picked me up and carried me downstairs.

The moment was almost surreal, and as I looked around, I realized that maybe I was finding exactly the home I had always wanted. I just knew

without a doubt in my fucking mind that I would have to fight for it tooth and nail.

You can't imagine what I would do to keep this. But anyone trying to hurt my mates? They were going to find out.

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CHAPTER 8

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PHILIP

I’d spent so much of my life in an altered state. I wish I could tell you that I just meant jumping dream from dream, which could leave someone like me in a weird high from the mix between alchemy and ink magic. A hybrid that should have never existed in the first place. But no. I didn’t just mean that.

My father had left when I was young, so young that I remembered little to nothing about him. It wasn’t until I was nearly eleven that my stepfather had come along. Piece of shit bastard. I’d always seen through his bullshit, but because my mom seemed happy, I never voiced it. I just kept my distance.

But that was before the bruises started appearing and I realized what was going on right under my nose.

Right before my sixteenth birthday, I’d come home to what I assumed was an empty house. I found out very quickly that was far from the truth. I’d walked in on my stepfather bashing in my mom’s head as she bled out, her pulse slowing to a stop right in front of my eyes. I hadn’t ever felt the type of fury I had in that moment. A fury that I hadn’t even known was possible. I may have blacked out, I wasn’t entirely sure. All I knew was that I’d returned the favor and absolutely massacred him. The next thing I remembered was being carted off in goddamn handcuffs to the Red Masques Academy. I thought it was going to be horrible.

I’d been pleasantly surprised.

Unfortunately, that moment had left a permanent scar on me, one that I didn’t think would ever truly leave. I’d kept people at a distance, and while my teammates were able to break through some walls, I’d spent most of my

time at the academy high off my ass, trying to forget how my mom looked. Dead. Unrecognizable due to blunt force trauma. The memory was far more vivid than the look of pure terror that had been on that bastard's face as I stuffed him full of different poisons like a goddamn turkey. He hadn't looked anything like himself when they carted his ass off for a funeral.

Good.

So yeah, I was no stranger to altered states, and while I'd toned it back a lot… there were still moments, just like this, where I considered slipping back into that lifestyle. The pain should have been dulled by now, but there were days where it didn't matter how long it had been, nights where all I could hope for was to make it through to the next day.

For someone who had dream jumping abilities, you would have thought I slept more. Instead, I found myself staring up at the ceiling of Maize's new bedroom, her soft breathing the only thing that made me feel somewhat better. At least she was finally getting some goddamn sleep. I knew she hadn't since all of the bullshit from the other night.

My fingers strung through her hair as she let out a soft sigh, her grip tightening on the loose shirt I wore. It was still fairly early in the night, so it was just her and I in the bedroom right now, everyone else downstairs. I'd all but begged her to go to sleep with me because I could feel the exhaustion radiating off her, despite her insisting she was wide awake. I'd been right, of course, although I was surprised with how quickly she'd fallen asleep considering it was a new place.

I expected her to have nightmares tonight, and I was right here to make sure I pulled her out of them. I made a promise to her, and I would never fucking break it. My lips pressed to her forehead gently as I mumbled her name, loving how it sounded coming off my lips.

I was glad we were here, and not just because of the security of the damn house, although that was a smart move. That wasn't why we had moved into our larger house, though. I mean, it was a great fucking reason so we didn't seem like nut jobs, but I am pretty sure that Maize saw right through it. No. We had moved in here because it was a home, together, with her, away from everything else. It made everything between us so much more real, and I don't think anyone was shying away from that anymore. I just hoped Maize knew what that meant. I hoped she understood how broken we really were.

My magic tightened around her possessively, the feel of her smoky, cold magic meeting mine as it bent under us, making me smile. When Maize was awake, she always pushed back, but when it was just her magic, it curled up like a kitten and I fucking loved it. I didn't question my obsessive need to dominate Maize.

I'd always been violent, and I had a horrible reputation at the academy—nearly as bad as Zed—and none of it was because of fucking dominance fights. No. Usually if someone annoyed me, I would fucking hurt them. It was that easy. I didn't even use my magic. Didn't need to. Plus, there was a part of me that enjoyed the challenge a bit more than I would care to admit.

I wondered when Maize would realize just how bad my reputation was, because I knew she had no idea right now. I didn't think she would look at me the way she did if that was the case. No, she was right to be cautious around someone like Valerio, but she probably shouldn't even be alone in bed with me. Not with the things I wanted to do to her. Not with the way I thought about her. I had a serious problem, and she was curled against me like I was any other man. Like I didn't consider doing demented things to her, dominanting her until the only name she could cry out was mine, a permanent sonnet on her lips. I was aware of how dangerous Maize was, but she was so concerned with hurting one of us that she wasn't paying attention to the web she was being wrapped in.

Maize wasn't going anywhere, even if she wanted to.

There was a small part of me that was afraid that I would drown her in my darkness. Afraid that I would blow out that flame growing in her chest, but I think I also knew that Maize was far stronger than that and always would be. It was what would make it so much more fucking satisfying when she submitted to me. Because she would.

My eyes strayed to her lips, knowing that it would be game over once I kissed her. She'd already given me permission to roam her dreams, marking that part of her subconscious whether she realized it or not. The moment she offered her lips to me, I was going to take it as a sign that she understood what was going on here.

Gently twisting a piece of her hair, I inhaled her fresh air scent as I considered diving into her head, curious what I would find right now. I had a feeling she wasn't dreaming fully, not yet. Maybe she would be too exhausted to do so.

My brow dipped at that. I wanted the opportunity to prove to her that I could turn her nightmares into a more pleasant experience… but I also didn't want her to suffer. Didn't want her to think about the shit she'd been through.

My jaw clenched as I breathed through the fury that threatened to collapse over me whenever I went down that thought path. I had the urge to bring Mario back to life so that I could kill him again. It was a small urge, considering I would never want to risk bringing back such a piece of shit, but just a moment to put him through the type of pain that he had subjected the woman curled up against me to.

"Philip?" Maize's soft voice had my skin prickling as I looked down at a pair of large silvery eyes that were watching me with sleepy curiosity.

Fuck, she was beautiful. *And mine.* I wanted her to be mine, badly. I didn't care how many people we had to kill to make that clear, because I very much would. No one was going to take her away from us. Ever. My thumb came out to trace her bottom lip as a shiver took over her frame, nearly making me groan at how her cheeks flushed.

"You should be sleeping," I said, my voice sounding odd to even myself. Then again, my thoughts hadn't been exactly pleasant tonight, and the normal sardonic grin that I plastered onto my face was no doubt noticeably gone.

"I did." She hesitantly reached up, her fingers brushing over my hair as a small warmth infused her eyes, turning them a darker blue. "I never sleep for long."

I almost smiled at that, knowing exactly what I could do to get her to sleep more solidly, and it had nothing to do with my magic. Instead, I rolled us so that I was looking down at her, her legs locked solidly between mine as I kept her caged against the soft material of her new bed. The moonlight from the window shone down on her, highlighting her peaceful, happy features.

"You don't have to be afraid of nightmares," I promised. "You know I won't let them get bad." Her eyes darkened as she nodded.

"I know," she murmured, "but it's the same with eating. If you're not used to it, you just don't feel the need. Which sounds ridiculous."

My smile grew as I considered something. "Want something to help you sleep?"

Her head tilted cautiously. “I don’t want to risk putting any of you in danger.”

I almost laughed at that, because if she only knew the effect our conversation earlier actually had on me… *hint*, it wasn’t upsetting in the least to find out that she had been able to completely roll my magic, even if she was being made to do so through a spell. I found it challenging and somewhat sexy, the concept that I’d been so close to death and that she had chosen to keep me alive. It was why I wouldn’t have minded if she marked me. Why I wouldn’t mind if Maize killed me.

Yeah, my priorities were fucked up a bit. When you lived your life in the dark for so long, anything in the light was tainted by that. So my emotions for Maize, despite being very strong and filled with whatever version of affection and possible love I could experience… were still bathed in darkness.

“They are staying up, I promise. They are working on something,” I stated persuasively, my lips tracing her jaw as her body melted against the bed.

“Okay,” she murmured as I flashed a smile. Rolling over, I walked towards the door, leaving her momentarily to go next door. I may not use my bedroom often, but sometimes I came here to get away. Opening the small case I kept next to my bed, I pulled out a single cylinder and carried it back into the bedroom. My cock jumped as I found Maize had rolled over, curling into the warm sheets I’d been laid out on, her lips pressed into a small smile. My eyes crawled over her with ownership as I ignored the urge to climb back onto the bed, pull those tiny shorts down, and ram home. Neither of us was ready for that. Ready for what that would mean.

“What’s that?” she asked as she flipped and I crawled back between her legs.

“A mixture of different herbs to help with sleep,” I answered honestly. “It’s going to make you very relaxed. Probably a bit stoned, though.”

Her lips pulled up into a small, wicked smirk. “Trying to take advantage of me, Philip?”

A deep rumble broke from my throat as I dipped my head so that we were only an inch apart. “I would much rather you be a willing participant in all things we do, unless you are into that, sweetheart. I’m adaptable.”

She had no fucking idea.

Maize’s eyes flared with heat as I chuckled softly, her lack of an answer and slight blush somehow making me even more turned on.

“Open your mouth,” I demanded softly, the cap to the small cylinder popping off and rolling to the floor. It was maybe a tablespoon of liquid, if that, so when I tilted it against her lips, I immediately poured it in. Maize swallowed, looking surprised, probably by the taste of raspberry I knew would be on her tongue.

“That tasted good,” she mumbled.

My smirk grew. “I bet.”

I could feel my magic running through her, infused in the potion, as I watched a flash of pink spark at her skin and a sleepy haze invade her eyes. Rolling us over, I pulled Maize on top of me, her fingers weaving through my hair as I tried to ignore just how turned on I was at her body half naked on top of me. There was just something so hot about seeing her this relaxed. I mean, there had been something hot about seeing her in our commander’s uniform as well, but this was damn near angelic.

No, Maize was darker than an angel. I didn’t know what she was, but it was far darker than any angelic being. And better. Far better. She was like a black rose, thorny and beautiful. It was painful to be close to her, but absolutely worth it.

I should have known that my obsessive side would get the better of me. It wasn’t completely surprising—I had always had the tendency—but never in my life had it been focused on someone like this. Well, someone I wasn’t killing. Maize’s eyes closed slowly before they opened again, their now silver tone once again filling with something unbearably sweet. Something that I wanted to cage and capture. She was like this delicate songbird that I wanted to keep caged forever.

What she didn’t realize was that I wasn’t really giving her an option. I could wait forever for Maize to make her decision, but I was never going to leave her alone. It wasn’t even possible anymore.

“Philip?” she mumbled, pulling herself against me so that she could bury her head against my neck. Well, at least I thought so. But when I felt her soft lips brush against my own, my eyes closed and a groan broke from my throat. I needed to keep control of this situation, but fuck, she tasted exactly like I imagined.

Her kiss was tentative and I let her explore, not taking care except to slip a hand against her jaw, wanting her to stay exactly where she was.

When her tongue brushed across the seam of my lips, I deepened the kiss, and she let out a soft sound that had my cock twitching. My magic jumped up and surrounded her in a wave of power that made the room almost appear as if it was filled with an inky substance.

Finally, I pulled back and brushed her dark hair from her flushed, sleepy face as a small smile lit her lips. My chest squeezed as the enormity of what I felt for Maize really slammed into me, making me glad that she was falling asleep so that I didn't accidentally tell her that I was falling in love with her. I'd never been in love before, but I was damn near positive that was what this was.

Her body relaxed fully against mine as she fell into a foggy, drug-induced sleep, my chest filling with contentment. Hopefully her sleep would be dreamless. I kissed her shoulder gently, and she brushed her lips against my neck. I pulled away as her magic rushed out and met mine, making my chest seize slightly, before relaxing. Fuck. I frowned, feeling like my heart had all but stopped for a minute, which made no damn sense at all.

Then it did.

The air around us suddenly filled with a glowing of purple, blue, and pink that seemed to surround and swirl off Maize. My eyes widened as small butterflies broke from her magic and spiraled through the room in a stunning kaleidoscope of colors. That was before one of them came near me, dancing across my skin before searing my neck and causing me to groan at the rush of fatigue I felt. Not unlike the night before.

What the hell was happening?

My magic zipped across my skin, snapping the feeling away as Maize's body lit up with a pale pink light, a small frown appearing on her brow. That was when I felt the burning on my neck as I lifted a hand to it, the skin hot to the touch. My eyes widened in realization as I looked down at her bare collarbone.

A small rose sat near her right shoulder, standing stark in comparison to her fair skin.

I'd marked her. And I was damn near positive that she'd marked me. Why hadn't there been an issue with her poison? How the hell did this even happen? My throat tightened with the meaning of this, with what this meant for the two of us, before a dark thought filtered through my head. One that even I recognized as unhealthy but didn't care to fix. *She couldn't leave me*

now. I'd never seen my mark on someone else's skin, and I found myself absolutely in love with it.

Emotion clogged my throat as I closed my eyes, knowing that this was going to be a shit show to explain in the morning, but not caring fully. There was nothing to be done.

Maize had kissed me. My magic just took my direction seriously. Now she wouldn't ever be able to leave us. I was keeping her.

At this point, I would have assumed I'd be used to waking up in someone else's dream. It had been happening nearly my entire life, before I'd even received my blood ink tattoo and realized what exactly I was. Yet I was still caught off guard waking in a dreamscape that I was not fully familiar with.

Maize's mind was like a fortress, a solid winter wall that was now sparking with my magic and allowing me to push past the icy barriers and winds into her haunted subconscious. It didn't take nearly as much effort as before, and that was largely because of the new markings, I had to assume. Also because she wasn't fighting it. She had given me permission, and I would never reject the offer to access her dreams, even if they were horrific.

Plus, I had a promise to keep.

I still had a foot in the real world, my magic obsessively keeping an eye on the room to keep her safe, but most of my attention was focused on my new surroundings. The dungeon that had served as Maize's home for three years. We'd been here last time, but somehow this was different, and it felt more raw and painful than before.

Not because of any threat of violence. Rather the opposite, in fact.

In the dream, Maize was barely conscious. The entire room was saturated with pain, and her thin frame was painted in black and blue bruises, the smell of burning skin accompanying the sizzling of iron against her back, wrists, and ankles. A whimper broke from her lips as I surged forward, kneeling down and examining everything they'd done to her. I wouldn't ignore it. I sure as hell wouldn't pretend that it hadn't happened for my peace of mind. No, I experienced all of it as I searched for her

magic, which was buried underneath the heaviness of something far more malevolent in the room.

Fury spiked through me as I kept a controlled hand on my magic, knowing that I needed to take care of her first before finding a way to release this anger I had towards men that were already dead. Brushing my fingers over the iron that held her captive, it disappeared, eaten up by an inky substance my magic produced. Her body sagged forward as I pulled her against my chest, her breathing ragged. A cold fury shook my frame as I felt moisture steak down my cheek, my fingers gently smoothing over her hair. Electric, sick, dark magic ran across her skin, and I knew instantly that this was a memory from moments after Mario had visited her. It made sense, considering her magical signature was essentially absent.

“Maize, sweetheart?” I whispered against her forehead as I held her close. “I need you to look at me. I need you to realize this is a dream.” A nightmare, but not like before. There was no aggressive threat, just endless pain and suffering. My magic ran across her skin, the black, oily texture smoothing away bruises as I yanked Mario’s hold from her. Almost instantly she began to breathe easier as her grip grew harder on me. *There we go.*

As she buried her head against my neck, my magic altered our reality from her dungeon to a bedroom that looked far more like her new one. If we needed to spend all night here, we could. I wasn’t going to let her relive that suffering. She never needed to do that again. I let out a soft hum, holding her close, knowing that she wasn’t fully herself yet.

“Philip?” Maize asked softly, her voice exhausted.

“I’m here,” I promised, brushing my nose against her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere.”

A small sob broke from her throat as I swallowed down my own emotion, knowing that she needed me to be strong right now, and that wasn’t something Maize would ever ask for. I just knew it. It was in the way she clung to me. In the way that she let me smooth my fingers over her back, including her scars, as I considered saying a bunch of shit that would probably freak her out.

Now was not the time to admit your obsession.

It was a mantra I continued to run through my head. I let out a soft hum as she finally looked up at me, silver tears streaming from her mirror-like eyes and staining her face. It was gorgeous, and I found myself leaning

forward, kissing her tears away as she shuddered, a raspy breath coming from her throat. I cupped her jaw gently.

“Where are we?” She swallowed nervously.

“I changed the dreamscape for a bit until I could get through to you,” I explained softly as she looked around, relief filling her gaze as she curled up further against me.

“I feel stupid that I can’t get over this,” she admitted, sniffing. “It’s been over a year, and I just keep getting more emotional about it, not less.”

“Because you aren’t fighting for your life anymore. Now you know you can finally express how you feel.”

“Maybe.” She sighed.

“I killed my stepfather after he beat my mom to death.”

Why the fuck did I say that? I honestly had no idea, but once it was out there, it was impossible to take back. Maize looked up at me, her expression filled with curiosity and sadness, but no surprise. Maybe she did realize just how fucked up I was. I stared at her, not adding anything, but wanting her to know that she wasn’t alone. I mean, clearly I was far more detached with emotion than she was, but it was the best I could think of.

“Holy shit,” Maize mumbled.

“I think I’m over it now, it’s been a while.” I inhaled, feeling rather clinical about it all but hoping it would help to some extent. I felt far more emotion towards her situation than my own. But wasn’t that love? Caring more about those you love and what they went through than you did yourself? “I did drugs for years trying to forget about it. That and killing people.”

“Tried to forget killing him?” she asked softly.

My smile grew slightly. “Nah, I wouldn’t want to forget that,” I said, my expression growing more somber. “Trying to forget about what she looked like when I found my stepfather beating in her skull. The image is still there, though. I don’t think it’s going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Philip…” She cupped my jaw.

I flashed her a small smile. “I just don’t want you to think it’s stupid to be upset about something like that. You were tortured for three years, Maize. It leaves a fucking imprint, so if we need to do this for the rest of forever, you will never hear me complain.”

“Forever, huh?” she murmured, her lips pressing up.

Oops.

I flashed her a smile and looked at her shoulder, my thumb rubbing across my mark as her eyes moved to the movement and then to my neck. Her eyes widened as I felt her pulse pick up.

“Did I…” Her voice sounded wobbly and nervous.

“Did we mark each other? Yes,” I mused. “Although I’m not exactly sure how it happened. You fell asleep after kissing me, and then your magic created these super trippy butterflies, and boom. Both of us had markings.”

“So you’re completely okay?” she whispered, looking panicked.

I answered honestly, brushing my nose against her skin. “Better than ever.”

Before she could say anything else, a cool wind broke over my magic as I snapped my head around, feeling something push past both of our walls. A low growl built in my throat as I tugged Maize against me. A figure walked from the corner of the room and caused Maize to still completely. My fingers tightened on her enough that they probably would leave a bruise, but if anything, she held me tighter.

“You again,” she breathed out as the cloaked figure pushed down her dark hood.

My eyes widened. Shit. A cold chill of apprehension ran over my skin as the woman knelt in front of us, watching the two of us with a predatory interest. That wasn’t what freaked me out the most, though. No, it was that the woman looked… like Maize.

I mean, she had dark eyes, but her skin tone and hair were an exact match. Their features were even similar, and despite the woman clearly being older, they looked maybe five years apart, like sisters. It was very chilling.

“I’m glad to see you made it out of the forest alive,” she said, her smile small.

“Did you put me there? How did I get there?” Maize demanded as the woman reached out and touched her hand. I immediately tugged Maize against me as the woman laughed openly, the sound breaking through the room. She met my gaze before looking back at Maize with what I had to call affection.

“No, I told you, it’s the ones trying to kill you.” She sighed. “And unfortunately they will try again. But you have more important matters to worry about. My timeline has been moved forward.”

“What timeline?” my girl demanded. I wanted to say more, but I felt floored by this entire situation, and when I went to open my mouth, I found I couldn’t. The woman smirked at me as I realized she had made that so on purpose. I pulled Maize closer as I kept tabs on my magic, wondering how hard it would be to push her from our dreamscape.

“Don’t bother,” the woman warned, narrowing her gaze at me. “I transcend any of your magic, child.”

Maize’s hand smoothed my hair, the woman watching the action with interest before continuing. “I need you down in the Demonic realm.”

“I’m sorry?” Maize reared back.

“Demonic realm.” The woman stood, pulling up her hood. “I need you down there as soon as possible.”

Maize’s mouth opened and closed, looking up at me, but all I could do was offer her a concerned look. The woman began to walk away. “Just trust me, Maize. I would never let anything bad happen to you. But I do need your help, so please convince those boys of yours to come with you if necessary. We are running out of time.”

Then she was gone.

“Did I dream that?” Maize whispered.

“No.” My voice was raspy as I finally let out a breath.

“Do we…” Maize tilted her head, looking up at me, bewildered. “Do we listen to her?”

Suddenly, my magic made me aware of the bedroom, and I groaned as the blockage I hadn’t recognized disappeared. I could literally feel the others freaking out because Cannon hadn’t been able to wake me up.

“What?” She frowned.

“We need to tell them,” I said and then slowly began to pull back out of the dreamscape, “While also explaining how the hell we marked each other.”

This was going to be fun.

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CHAPTER 9

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MAIZE

"Valerio," I began, taking a sip of my coffee and offering the man a small smile. "If I knew how the hell it happened, I would obviously tell you. I don't *like* poisoning my mates."

"Love that word," Cannon rumbled from where he sat behind me. His chest was serving as my backrest as I watched the early morning light flood our new living room. I knew we needed to grab everything from the academy today, but I could see myself very quickly adjusting to living here. I mean, it was beautiful, and my mates wanted us to live together. If I was going to give this 'mates' thing a try, there was no point in fighting this element of it.

Not that I would ever want to.

Sitting across from me, Valerio looked freshly showered and well-rested despite clearly not having slept. His dark purple hair was damp and messy, his muscular shoulders fitted with a dark shirt and his legs encased in dark jeans. He looked yummy. Absolutely yummy.

Cannon did as well, but he was far more sleepy looking. His dark hair was messy and he was shirtless, my hand resting on his leg over the sweatpants he'd thrown on. I had the urge to straddle him and explore his skin, including the scar that marred his muscular chest in angry silver lines, but I restrained myself, not knowing if it was associated with something that may trigger him.

Hell, even resting my back against him hurt a bit. I knew it wasn't real pain, but somehow my body would always associate pain with the touching of them. Maybe it was a nerve thing.

“Philip, explain it again,” Valerio demanded, looking puzzled. My eyes moved towards the man in question, lounging in a large leather chair and looking much happier than he had in my dream last night. Whatever he had given me to sleep had me feeling goddamn amazing this morning, and when his eyes ran over me, a hint of pride shone on his face as if he knew it. That could also be due to the blush that came over my cheeks thinking about the kiss we’d shared. Like myself, he appeared well rested, his hoodie and sweats far more casual than I was used to seeing him in. The connection between us was strumming with pleasure.

“She couldn’t sleep, so I gave her a potion,” Philip explained. Cannon growled, my fingers patting his leg in a comforting way. I’d already explained that I’d known the effect. There was no point in demonizing Philip as if he had somehow drugged me. I’d happily taken it. “She fell asleep after kissing the shit out of me—”

“Did not,” I muttered, feeling embarrassed as he flashed me a smile and winked.

“Anyway, once she fell asleep, her magic literally started glowing around her, and these adorable, probably deadly, butterflies started moving around the space. One landed on my neck and shocked the hell out of me—my heart almost stopped—and then I realized both of us had a mark.”

“Maybe my magic marks differently, based on your magic?” I suggested.

“So your magic likes to poison me? Good to know.” Charm chuckled as he lounged with a cup of coffee next to us. I scowled, but then couldn’t help but smile at him, knowing he was joking. I wanted to tell him to put on a shirt because his button-down was literally open, showing off his tan chest and abs, making me want to crawl over him and kiss the shit out of *him*.

“Maybe if your magic wasn’t such a bastard…” I sang as he snatched up my hand, kissing it before looking back over at Valerio.

“Okay, this makes no sense,” our leader groaned. “What happened next?”

I zoned out as Philip began talking about the odd woman who invaded my dream, making me glad that I wasn’t losing my shit and that she did, in fact, exist. I looked over Valerio’s shoulder as Chait walked down the stairs, humming a song under his breath. My eyes narrowed on his completely tattooed chest and low-slung jeans. How was that fair? No. There needed to

be rules. I was going to start wearing no fucking clothes if they were going to pull this shit.

“No,” Maddox growled from where he leaned against the couch and looked up at me. My eyes widened with amusement, realizing that he’d heard that. Crap. I had to wonder how much he would hear once… I mean, *if*, my magic bonded to him. Completely his choice. His eyes glowed as I took a sip of coffee and cast him a small, sweet smile.

“Where is Zed?” I asked curiously. Chait pointed behind him. Hopping up, I walked towards the stairs and made my way up, all the doors open except one. I knocked softly, but when no one responded, I turned the knob and peeked in. My brows rose, finding Zed sleeping. His dark hair was messy and on his face as he laid on his back, his muscular arms above his head. My eyes greedily ran over his skin as I realized he was covered in tattoos… crosses? Was that what they were? Hadn’t I read somewhere that those were an Earth realm religious symbol? My hand twitched to touch him, but I pulled back, not wanting to be a creep.

I swallowed as my gaze dipped, noticing the dark hair that trailed down the center of his abs and dipped below his dark athletic pants. A small noise built in my throat, because I could literally see that he was partially hard, and a flush invaded my face, knowing I needed to get out of here.

“Keep looking at me like that, angel, and we won’t be leaving the house today,” Zed said as my eyes snapped up to where he was watching me with a cocky smile.

“I wasn’t looking at you.” I immediately flashed a smile. “I just thought your athletic pants were cool.”

“Want me to take them off so you can get a better look?” He chuckled as my center tightened. The dangerous man eased out of bed and stood in front of me, his hand wrapping around the back of my neck as I inhaled his expensive scent.

“Did you come to wake me up, angel?” he asked, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear as I nibbled on my lip gently.

“I may have. I wondered where you were,” I explained as he stepped forward, backing me up and pressing me against his bedroom wall, my coffee mug between us.

“Miss me?” He leaned forward and brushed his lips against mine, making me jump as I let out a soft sound of need.

“What if I did?” I asked curiously, running my fingers over his chest.

Leaning down, he pressed a deeper kiss to my lips as my fingers tightened on my coffee mug. Zed groaned as he pressed further against me, before pulling back, his eyes going from purple to black as I nearly asked him why he stopped.

Then I realized why.

“As much as I love this,” Chait mused from where he laid on the unmade bed, “Cannon needs you, Maize. He wants you to run to the academy with him, didn’t say why.”

“Cock block,” Zed muttered as he kissed my forehead and grumbled, walking towards the bathroom and leaving me to sip on my coffee, trying to not laugh.

Chait tossed me a cheeky grin as I followed him out of the bedroom, but instead of going downstairs, I went towards my bedroom.

Closing the door, I sought out the bathroom, which I hadn’t had a chance to look at last night. When I found it, my lips popped open, realizing that they had spared no expense on the houses. Two tall glass walls faced the forest, and when I pressed a button, they were suddenly covered by curtains. The tile floors were a forest green and cream pattern that matched the pale walls. I walked towards the vanity, putting down my coffee mug, as I found a toothbrush and anything else I could have needed. Yeah, they had totally planned this.

Stripping out of my oversized shirt and shorts, I turned on the shower, deciding it was a quicker solution than soaking in the massive bathtub that I was dying to try out. My shower was fairly quick since I didn’t bother to wash my hair. I braided it back and brushed my teeth, feeling far fresher than before. Examining my face, I realized that for the first time in a long time, I looked as well-rested as I felt. I kept my towel wrapped around me as I made my way towards the closest.

The closet that was already stocked full of clothes. I muttered under my breath and reminded myself to yell at them about this, but then I realized they would probably just claim it was a team expense. A bunch of bullshit is what it was. Deciding to keep it casual today, I chose a pair of dark skinny jeans and sneakers that matched a zip-up jacket that fit tightly to my body. It was comfortable and warm, which was my only fashion requirement ever.

Gray would totally kill me if she ever knew how little of an opinion I had on clothing. I swear, she had a field day last Christmas when she found

out I didn’t have a dress to wear. Not that I would complain, I just didn’t want to have to pick it.

“Maize,” Cannon said from the door as I found the man fully dressed and looking handsome as hell waiting for me. “You interested in coming to the academy with me? I wanted to check on my brother and then Brielle and her sisters.”

“Absolutely.”

Most of the guys were getting ready for the day, so I only had the opportunity to give Maddox a hug as he pressed a kiss to my forehead and gave Cannon a look I didn’t fully understand. Then, when I thought I was finally making an exit, a hand came across my ass hard enough that I literally turned around so fast I knocked into Cannon. Not because it hurt, either.

Because my face was literally bright red and… it was hot. Because it was hot.

“What the hell was that?!” I demanded as Valerio walked towards the kitchen, not looking back. Cannon was laughing behind me.

“That was what you get for wearing tight pants!” he called back. I scowled as I walked out the front door, my ass pulsing slightly from where his hand had hit it. I literally couldn’t stop thinking about it… which was probably his intention. As we made our way down the path towards the academy, I considered all the ways I could get back at him.

“Anything you do, he will find a way to pay back tenfold,” Cannon mused.

I met his gaze, offering him an innocent look. “I wasn’t going to do anything.”

He smoothed a hand over my lower back, oddly not inciting any negative reaction from touching my scars, before smiling further. “Mhmm, sure you weren’t.”

“So what’s going on with your brother?” I asked curiously.

“He started classes at the academy this past year, though he’s always lived here… well, since our mother left.” Cannon sighed, a streak of sadness crossing his silver eyes. “I don’t see him as much as I should, but luckily he’s rooming with his best friend, so I’m sure he prefers that. Before, he was living on the commander’s floor where Brielle is now.”

“When did your mom leave?” I asked softly.

Cannon inhaled sharply. “Right after Jude’s birth. He’s only twelve, so there is a bit of an age difference. Our father was around for a while, but he was killed in a small Dark Fae attack along the border… so I joined the Red Masques, and they’ve taken care of us ever since.”

“I’m sorry she left.” I squeezed his hand gently, one I hadn’t even realized I’d taken, and he flashed me a smile, the shadows leaving his gaze.

“Worked out better, really. I miss my father, but he wasn’t around all that much. This place has become my real home,” he offered honestly before kissing my temple and opening the door for me. “Plus, you’re here now.”

Before I could say anything in response, a flash of red hair caught my eye. A giggle, followed by two girls, had me watching as Brielle’s younger sisters flashed past us, running into the back grounds of the academy. I arched a brow as Cannon nodded up towards the stairs where Brielle was shaking her head and looking at the door with frustration.

“I’m guessing they went out back?” she asked, swinging herself down the staircase rail and landing in front of us.

“Yep, ran right past us,” I assured. Brielle flashed a smile.

“I heard we’re training together,” she called out as she started after the girls. “I’m super excited, I’ve never had formal training.”

“Let me know when you want to start,” I replied as she waved and exited the building.

“They seem to be settling in,” I said, directing my attention back to Cannon. “I didn’t realize we had decided on the training thing, but that should be fun.”

“I still think you need to give some thought to teaching,” Cannon suggested as we made our way up the stairs. “You are a natural leader, Maize. It’s a perfect fit.”

Nibbling my lip, I looked up at him. “Maybe. Let’s start with the training thing. I’m more comfortable with that than standing at the front of a classroom.”

Cannon squeezed my hand, but the sound of pounding footsteps had me looking up to watch Cirdan jogging down the steps. He offered both of us a head nod as he slid past and went in the direction of Brielle, followed by four other men, all of whom greeted us but kept up their pace. I wasn’t positive if they were following Cirdan or Brielle—maybe both—but man,

they were not the people I'd want to sit down and have a beer with. They sort of scared me, and *that* was saying something.

"It's natural to feel uncomfortable around them. It's their magic," Cannon assured. "I can explain better later, but essentially it's not Horde-based, so it's going to feel off to you."

"That makes me feel better, I thought I was losing my edge," I mused.

Cannon barked out a laugh as we turned down a hallway. I arched a brow as we almost ran right into… a mini version of Cannon, essentially. Large blue eyes stared up at us as the kid let out a groan, throwing his head back. The kid behind him froze, trying to hide something behind his back. My smile grew.

"What are you doing?" Cannon asked, looking half-amused and half-frustrated. "Both of you are supposed to be heading to class."

Neither of them were in uniforms, the other kid's bright blonde hair was messy, and they were both wearing athletic pants and matching hoodies.

"Jogging!" the kid explained easily. "We were totally about to go for a run."

Jude rolled his eyes. "*Luna*. We were going to visit Luna."

Luna? Gray's adopted daughter and Horde princess?

Cannon sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Jude, we've talked about this."

"I am keeping my promise. I stayed in the Red Masques instead of joining SE to be closer to her," the kid bit out as his friend's expression blanked, "but she just got back into town from a visit she took with one of her dads. I'm going to see her."

Cannon looked down at me and seemed to come to a decision. "How do you feel about a trip to the castle, Maize?"

My smile grew. *Seeing whatever this drama was? And Gray? I was down.*

"I'm game, but Philip… Charm… and Chait may need to come," I pointed out. Jude offered me a thankful smile, and I gave him a small one back.

Cannon gently pulled me along as the boys walked ahead, clearly excited about seeing Luna. That was when it hit me.

"I didn't realize Jude was your brother. He was the kid always around Luna. I didn't know that was him, though."

Cannon looked at the boys ahead of him and spoke quietly. “Yeah, it’s complicated, and I’m not positive he’s fully come to the conclusion that is fairly obvious to everyone else, but I’m not encouraging it.”

“What conclusion?”

“Luna is Jude’s mate.”

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CHAPTER 10

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CANNON

Our team hadn't been back to the castle since begging Queen Gray to help us find Maize, so in some ways, it wasn't necessarily a bad idea that we were here to begin with. Even if just to smooth shit over with the SE guard after killing one of their commanders.

Apparently, Richard wasn't very well liked, though, because no one seemed to be giving much of a fuck, and any tension that was there seemed relatively normal. Plus, this was the only surefire way to ensure that Jude actually came back to the academy to begin with. If left to his own devices, he and Jackson would probably spend their entire day with Luna. Something that I understood in theory, despite not agreeing with it. I was waiting for the day when he put it together and came to me freaking out about having a mate. Hell, at least I could tell him it was a legitimate thing now—I hadn't believed in the mate thing fully until finding Maize, but now I knew better.

My brow arched curiously as I watched the three of them from across the massive three-story sunroom on the castle's north side. The entire space had floor to ceiling windows and was covered in rich greenery that stretched along the ceiling and down the walls, like a massive bird cage. It had always been one of my favorite rooms in the castle, and I was happy to see that Maize seemed to be enjoying it as well. It was a fairly common place for SE and Red Masques to hold meetings, so it didn't seem all that odd that we were here to begin with. Plus, Jude, Jackson, and Luna were legitimately playing a board game and laughing their asses off about something. It was so innocent that I didn't think it was worth breaking up the authentic enjoyment radiating off them.

Well, except until anyone greeted Princess Luna. Then my brother got this odd, angry look on his face that had me smiling because I knew it was his wolf. *That was only going to get worse.* I felt bad for Jude because I knew that experiencing all of that at a young age must be overwhelming, especially if it was even a small smidge of how I felt over Maize.

I looked down at my hand on Maize's long leg as she looked up from the large book she was reading, seemingly interested in it, while basking in the sunlight that was shining on her. It was unfair how beautiful she was.

I was glad that she came with me. I mean, sure, Jude and Jackson shouldn't be missing classes, but if they were going to be little shits then I was glad Maize was here. I did feel bad and wondered if she was bored, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

We hadn't been here for too long, but I knew she was waiting for Queen Gray to arrive, her eyes lighting up with interest upon mentioning going to the castle. I actually was looking forward to talking to her guard as well, because frankly, we hadn't left on perfect terms last time we saw them and were panicking over Maize. *Not that Valerio gave a shit.* No, he didn't seem to care that last time he was here the man had pretty much freaked the fuck out.

Instead, he was using this time to talk with other SE commanders about the problem at hand. I was glad the others had worked out their class schedules so they could come with, because the room was filled with SE members, and I felt better having extra eyes on Maize's safety. I didn't trust any of these fuckers. I mean, what did it say that someone like Richard had existed in a place of power in their hierarchy for so long? In my opinion, SE needed a reboot, but whether that would actually happen wasn't up to me. It didn't help that I could feel eyes on Maize, considering a lot of the conversation revolved around the attack on her, something that she seemed to be ignoring or had blocked out. Maddox was having a much harder issue doing so, having to leave the room several times, while Charm sat nearby at a table with Zed, a scowl permanently etched on his face.

I was thanking the Maker that I didn't have the ability to hear what they were thinking, because I would probably lose my shit. My fingers curled around the back of Maize's neck gently as she leaned back into my touch, letting out a happy sound as I used my thumb to brush her skin gently. I didn't think she realized just how comfortable she'd become with us

recently. I didn’t know if that was due to her giving this a real chance or if it was just a natural response to our connection. I was a fan either way.

My wolf was a pissy bastard, but I couldn’t do jack shit about his problem.

As in, he was pissed we hadn’t marked and claimed her yet. My eyes flashed down to her elegant neck as she continued to read, my tongue running over my teeth as they pulsed with slight pain. This was so not the right time and place for this train of thought, and my wolf did not give a fuck. I nearly rolled my eyes at the rumble that broke from my throat, causing Maize to look up at me with curiosity, my head shake making her smile slightly as she patted my chest and looked back down. My wolf quieted at the small amount of attention she had just given him. Needy fucking bastard.

Marking her right now would prove a point.

No. Fuck. I didn’t want any of these bastards seeing Maize in a sexual light, let alone being marked by me. As far as they were concerned, she didn’t exist. Maybe I should suggest we move to a different room, or wrap a blanket around her so that her stunning face just poked out of the top… but that would be far too adorable. Nevermind. That didn’t even include the fact that now my wolf was concerned that she was cold in her light zip-up jacket. My eyes moved down to her slight cleavage that pressed against the zipper, making my cock jump to attention. Wonderful. Fucking wonderful.

My brow dipped, thinking about how cold she’d been when we’d found her yesterday morning. I don’t think I’d ever been as terrified as I was while searching for her in the forested grounds leading to the Dark Fae border. I had known she was there—I could feel her magic through our bond, pulling faintly—but every time I tried to find her, it was like her scent disappeared. When I finally found her, passed out and bleeding, I think my heart had stopped until I kicked it into action, and the rest of the night was a blur of ensuring that she fucking lived.

My throat closed up as a whine of concern almost worked its way out. No. I was not fucking doing this right now. If I did, I was going to end up pulling her onto my lap or taking her back to our house where I knew she would be safe.

That concept, us living together, made me feel slightly better. When she had mentioned being hungry, I had thought it was the perfect solution. Get her in the new house and find my mate food. It was that simple in my mind,

plus now all of her things would be moved over there today. My wolf growled slightly at the idea of another male's scent on her shit, but there was nothing I could do about it. Well, until I got back and took all of her clothes and scented them when she wasn't looking like the weirdo I was. Oh, or just put her in all of my clothes. That was a far better option.

"What are you thinking about?" Maize asked, looking up at me. I realized I'd been staring at her pretty openly. I felt my ears heat as I flashed her a smile and shrugged, as if I wasn't being a fucking lunatic.

Luckily, that was right when Queen Gray arrived.

Almost immediately, everyone in the room, including myself, stood as Queen Gray waltzed through the crowd of people, waving off the others as if she was uncomfortable with them standing. I didn't blame her. I had to imagine that it was weird going from not being raised royal to being treated like this. I didn't know a lot about Gray's background, but I did know that she hadn't returned until almost a year and a half ago.

Yet despite the woman being objectively terrifying, Maize offered her a friendly smile as Gray nearly rushed over to her, pulling her into a tight hug. Surprised noises filled the space as Rhodes, who was following shortly behind, barked orders for the SE to get back to shit. I could tell he was in a bad mood, and I didn't bother asking why—the man was a bit of an overcontrolling asshole. I mean, I had my moments, and Valerio even more so, but Rhodes had some actual issues with control.

Apparently, that extended into *all* things… but that was just rumor. One that I would never inquire about because that was a very easy way to get my neck snapped. I happened to enjoy my neck, so that wasn't an option. Plus, if I didn't have a head, I couldn't mark Maize, as my wolf kindly reminded me.

"Good to see you." I offered Rhodes and Adyen a handshake as I smiled politely at Gray. "Your Majesty." I almost immediately moved my gaze back to Adyen though, as he grunted, sitting down next to Rhodes. There were just certain things you didn't fuck with when it came to shifters and mates. For example, when Commander Edwin told me Vegas was pregnant last year, I immediately understood why I couldn't come to their house… that was just a horrible idea.

But more so, unless you had a really important reason, you just avoided other people's mates. It was why I was glad when both men greeted Maize but also left Gray and Maize to their conversation, not wanting to fuck with

that balance. When it came to mates, it didn't matter if someone was above or below you in the hierarchy—mate status was the only thing that mattered. Usually, when there were conflicts or misunderstandings, it was because the offending party wasn't a shifter. Unfortunately, we had those in fucking spades around the Horde, so it tended to be a constant problem.

My eyes moved back across the room, my protective urge for Jude satisfied as I watched him and Luna laugh about something as two of her fathers joined them. Neo and Athens seemed to like Jude just fine, but Taylor always had a scowl on his face, probably because he understood that they were mates.

I didn't blame them. I couldn't imagine having a daughter and knowing she'd already met her mate at such a young age. It was innocent now, but boys could be total assholes. I loved my brother, but as he got older? You better bet I would be keeping an eye on him. I didn't have any intention of starting shit with the Royal Guard.

"Jude better be careful," Adyen warned on a rumble. I flashed a smile, not taking offense.

"He doesn't even realize they are mates," I pointed out, "but I've always told him the rules when it comes to mates. Until both of them are eighteen, he won't say jack shit. *If* he even figures it out before then."

Rhodes made a semi-content sound and changed the subject. "I heard you killed one of our commanders. The one we transferred over for interrogation."

"I didn't kill anyone," I corrected, amused. Maize squeezed my hand in a comforting gesture, clearly half tuned into the other conversation going on. "Someone used a memory removal spell on him and he lost his shit. His use was expired. His daughter, on the other hand, has decided to join the Red Masques Academy, along with her two sisters, so that should be interesting… but if the bruises on her skin tell me anything, their father was a piece of shit and no one is missing him."

Rhodes froze. "He abused the girls?"

"That's what Maddox said," I confided quietly. "Apparently, there were quite a few SE commanders involved… but Maddox said they are already gone or were killed in the Dark Fae battle. Unfortunately."

"Who killed him?" Adyen asked, his eyes darkening at my information spill.

“Cirdan,” Maddox said as he sat down next to me. “And rightly so. Those girls have been through… a lot. Way too much for someone that young.”

“How old?” Rhodes asked.

“Nineteen, fifteen, and twelve,” I bit out, my jaw clenching at the injustice of it.

Rhodes shook his head. “Get me a list of who was involved when you have time. I know it’s a delicate situation, but I want to ensure they are removed.”

Not from their position in SE—from the Horde, no doubt.

“Is Cirdan the one—”

“Yeah,” Maddox chuckled in response to Adyen’s unspoken question. I wasn’t surprised they’d heard of him. Since arriving, the witch had made waves in the Horde, and not because of his magic. No, he and his team just handled shit in a way that resulted in very little friends. With that being said, Brielle seemed to not care at all, so I was going to just hope that he didn’t do anything drastic. I could tell that Maize liked the girl, and if he hurt her, I would probably have to hurt him, and that was just a lot of work.

Before we could continue our conversation, a set of doors was thrown open, and I immediately pulled Maize onto my lap as she let out a small sound, my head snapping to the side as I muttered a curse. I breathed out, shaking my head, realizing it was just one of our squadron leads. Which wasn’t any better, but fuck, give me a heart attack. Maize smoothed a hand through my hair and cast me an amused look that had me narrowing my eyes. If she kept looking at me like that, I wasn’t going to be responsible for my actions.

There were a lot of ways to prove that she was mine, and one of them was bending her over and burying my teeth and cock… fuck! I groaned as Maddox slammed his elbow into my side, making me snarl as Maize offered both of us a confused look.

“What was that?” she asked as the squadron lead spoke to Valerio.

“He’s being a perv,” Maddox summarized as I growled. I was going to get him back for that. No doubt in my mind.

“Oh.” Maize blushed and winked at me, making me let out a low, dangerous noise.

“We need to go.” Valerio stood up and looked at the group of us.

Fuck a duck. If he was pulling us back to the academy, there was a reason. I stood, shaking Adyen and Rhodes' hands again before saying goodbye to Queen Gray, her and Maize making plans to see one another again. I gently led her forward as I walked towards my brother, feeling guilty about having to cut his time short despite it having been almost two hours.

"Jude, we gotta head back," I said. Princess Luna looked up at me, a scowl filling her face. I felt bad about that, slightly.

"We can send him back with someone," Athens offered, looking authentically concerned at his daughter's expression.

"I'll make sure he gets back safe," Neo amended as Luna clapped her hands and went back to their game. Jude watched me as I ran a hand through my hair and nodded.

"You have extra training tomorrow, both of you," I called out as Maize intertwined her fingers with mine, the group a bit ahead of us as we made our way through a maze of hallways towards the entrance. Instantly, I was concerned about her lack of clothing. I looked down at my shirt, considering giving it to her, but when she fanned her face slightly, I stopped myself, hoping she would tell me if she was cold.

"It was good to see Gray," Maize commented as I nodded.

Valerio's entire frame was tense, and I was worried about what exactly was going on. I urged us forward as I asked my question.

"There was an attack, someone destroyed our dorm."

Fuck.

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CHAPTER 11

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MAIZE

"Are you positive they don't need help?" I asked Maddox, my magic tugging me back up towards the academy stairs. I frowned as we stepped out of the building, my anxiety growing. I know that they said that everything was already moved to our place and that it was just damage to the shit that was staying, but it still felt wrong to not be there to help.

Although, I also wasn't positive that I wanted to see all the slurs that were apparently covering the walls. I inhaled, knowing that the academy was very much going to be put on lockdown. Especially after the warning that Valerio had given only last night.

"Positive," Maddox rumbled, urging me towards the house. "I don't like you being in the academy until we know which fuckhead we are going to have to kill."

"You can't kill students." I tapped his nose as he chuckled softly.

"Oh yes I can," he growled, wrapping an arm around my waist and nipping my ear. "I'll do so happily, Maize. They deserve it if they are threatening your safety in any way."

I blushed at that, a heated chill rolling over my skin. "Well, when you put it that way…"

Maddox pushed through the house doors and immediately turned me, pressing my back against the front hall wall while I tipped my head back. I could see something warring in his gaze as I smoothed a hand over his cut jaw and up the runes that covered his stunning face.

"What if you had been there? What if we had taught like normal and you would have been there by yourself?" he voiced, his tone raw and filled

with trepidation.

My fingers gripped his jaw as I spoke honestly. “If someone was ever a real threat to me, I would kill them, Maddox. I would probably also feel guilt about it, because I’m fucked up like that, but you have to trust me that I would be fine.”

Maddox rumbled, making me squeak as he easily picked me up and carried me up the stairs. “It’s not about trust, teacup. It’s about protecting what’s mine.”

I blushed as I found myself leaning forward, pressing a hesitant kiss to his lips as he let out a low, dangerous groan, stopping at the top of the stairs and leaning me against the wall. My legs tightened around him as my fingers gripped his hair, taking the kiss slow despite the roll of heat that blasted my skin. I could not get over the effect this man had on me. It was so fucking dangerous.

“Maize,” his voice was low and dark, “you can’t tease me like that.”

“Who said I was teasing?” I nipped his bottom lip, glad that I was distracting him from his little spiral into overprotective madness. Don’t get me wrong, I was very glad that he felt that way because I was overprotective over them, *but* it also was far more fun to keep him lighthearted. I didn’t want him to worry.

I let out a small moan as my back hit an unfamiliar bed, Maddox’s scent surrounding me as the man crawled on top of me, his large frame wedged between my legs.

“Stop distracting me from worrying. It won’t work and it will just get you fucked,” he insisted as my eyes flared, realizing that my thoughts were very much not safe from him.

“Well then, I may want to continue,” I teased, looping my leg around his as he rocked his hard length against my hot center before burying his head against my neck and letting out a low, tortured sound.

I let out a small laugh as he rolled over so that I was straddling him, suddenly glad we’d kicked our shoes off downstairs. Shifting my hips, I rolled them forward while using my fingers to crawl against his chest, the shirt he was wearing only a few buttons from being open. I found myself unbuttoning them one by one as he watched me with an intense and possessive look, his hands gripping my ass in a firm hold that had my center tightening dangerously.

“Maize, you shouldn’t play with me,” he warned, his voice laced with something that I knew was darker than normal. “My patience and control when it comes to you are very limited.”

Nibbling my lip, I found myself examining his bright eyes and realizing just how much I cared about Maddox. I mean, not just that he was sexy as hell, but what a fundamental part of my life he’d become. I mean, I knew I loved him, I just needed to work up the goddamn nerve to tell him like I had with Chait.

“Maize.” His growl had me snapping my head up from where it had drifted to my fingers undoing the buttons on his shirt. I offered him a small smirk, wondering if he heard that thought, as I moved down the buttons until his shirt fell to the side, exposing his muscular, perfect body.

“I just want to explore,” I promised, bringing my lips down to press against his skin. He inhaled sharply, his fingers tightening on me hard enough I let out a small moan.

“I can’t handle that,” he said, his nostrils flaring as my fingers flicked open the button on his jeans.

I pressed a light kiss to his jaw and trailed it towards his lips, nerves running through me as I decided to take the jump. “So you won’t let the woman that loves you explore your— Maddox!”

My voice turned to a squeak as I was pinned down on the bed fast enough that my vision swam, my pulse increasing as a pair of vibrant eyes met mine. I could see the heat and rapture there, making me realize just how close to the edge he’d been. Oddly, it didn’t scare me. Not at fucking all.

“Say it again,” he snarled, his hand coming around my jaw lightly, his thumb running across the skin possessively.

“I love you.” I blinked, my cheeks blasting with heat.

Maddox brought his lips down to mine in a gentle brush of his lips. “Maize, I’m never going to let you go. You know that? You told me you loved me. If you love me, I won’t let you go. Promise me that I can keep you. Forever.”

“I promise,” I whispered.

“I love you, teacup.” He nipped my bottom lip before literally flipping me over as I let out a very undignified squeak, grabbing a pillow as he pulled my ass back. A moan broke from my throat as he gripped my hips

and rubbed against me, his hard length causing my body to tremble in anticipation as I arched against him.

“Maddox,” I gasped as he reached around, unzipping my jacket and tossing it to the side, leaving me in a lace bra and my jeans, bent over as his hands ran across my body as if considering something.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, his voice raspy and filled with something almost desperate.

“You know I do,” I murmured.

“Trust me enough that you will give up control, even of your magic, so I can claim you?” He flicked the back of my bra as my breasts tightened further in the cool air, and I let him slide off the bra before he rolled me so that he was caging me from above, his face filled with sincere affection and need.

“What if I—” I stopped, feeling a threat of terror at him ending up like…

“Trust me,” he demanded softly, “I will make sure nothing bad happens.”

Examining his face, I nodded slowly as a devious grin filled his face. I whimpered as his lips suddenly captured my nipple, my eyes rolling back at the torturing, teasing pace he set. I squirmed against him as he moved to the other, causing me to grip his hair as he groaned, seeming to love the slight tug of pain. A needy sound broke from my throat as he moved down towards my pants, tugging them off before groaning and looking over my essentially naked frame, covered only by a scrap of lace.

“Fuck, teacup,” he growled, “you are so goddamn gorgeous.”

“Maddox.” My cheeks flushed as he lowered himself down, pressing a kiss to my lips.

“Put down the walls, Maize,” he demanded.

I took a chance and relaxed them, his magic immediately flooding in and vise-gripping mine. My eyes fluttered shut at the dominance there, my entire body flooding with heat as my magic went immobile, looking fucking thrilled at what was happening. I was distracted enough that when I heard a rip and his mouth met my hot center, I let out a legitimate cry of relief. Oh fuck.

His tongue pressed against me as he sucked on my clit, making my legs shake. I tried to shift and move, but he pressed his hand to the center of my sternum and held me still. I cried out as my climax began to build, his

mouth literally tasting every inch of my pussy as he slid a finger inside of me, causing my back to arch off the bed.

“Holy hell, you are tight,” he groaned. The way he held me was hard and rough, his mouth demanding every inch of pleasure to be wrung from my body. It was almost too much. Scratch that, my eyes were practically watering with how overwhelming the sensation was. A tremble worked its way over my skin as he continued to play with my body, working me up to what I knew would be a point of no return.

“I need you to come, teacup. Come so I can pound into your tiny little pussy and shatter you.” His snarl had my entire body going up in flames.

Fuck.

“Maddox!” I cried out as I tightened around him, his teeth grazing my clit. Everything vibrated around me, a hot molten mess of lust invading my system as I shivered at the oversensitivity of his mouth on me.

My eyes widened as I opened them to find Maddox kneeling over me like some fucking god, his fingers wrapped around his hard cock as he stroked himself while looking over me. I whimpered as I moved my eyes up his tattooed body, his gaze flashing up from where my opening was spread before him like a goddamn offering.

“Tell me I can go in bare,” he demanded, gripping my hip and pressing his tip to my entrance. “I want to feel every fucking inch of you squeeze around me while you come.”

“Yes,” I moaned as my legs fell open fully, allowing him to slide in, his desperate, almost feral sound only encouraging me to pull him in further.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, holding himself over me as I watched his abs contract in restraint as his hard length began to stretch me, making my eyes water with relief. I was so fucking glad he was over me, making me feel secure and safe. My memories from before were extinguished, replaced with images of this god-like man literally holding my magic and I down as he slowly inched his massive cock inside of us. My breathing went ragged as he buried himself to the hilt, and both of us let out a sound of relief mixed with pain.

“You are so big,” I gasped out as my fingers gripped his hair, my legs shaking at the pressure.

“I’m going to cum if you say that again,” he bit out, nipping my neck as I bared it to him completely, his tongue following the line of it up until he

nipped my jaw again. His cock pulsed inside of me as I began to shift, finally past the slight tinge of pain I felt at being stretched.

“Please move,” I begged as his eyes met mine. He pressed his lips down before pulling out slightly, only to slam the fuck back in.

“Holy shit!” I cried out as my legs wrapped around his hips, the rhythm becoming suddenly brutal and fast-paced. I couldn’t even complain as I clung to him, his cock jackhammering into me as I moaned out his name, my body shivering from the assault of pleasure that he was serving up. I found myself biting down on his shoulder, not breaking skin but making a point as his movements became aggressive and hard.

I could feel his magic growing and expanding in me as mine stayed essentially non-active, everything becoming static, pleasure-filled ecstasy. Tears streamed down my face as he caught my hands and brought them above my head, avoiding pressing on my wrists but keeping me captive. I found myself shocked at how much fucking pleasure one person could bring me, as my entire form shook against him.

“Mad,” I whimpered, “I’m going to come.”

“Come for me, Maize, right the fuck now.” He slammed into me hard before pulling back out and continuing his brutal, demanding pace.

I screamed out his name as I came apart on his bare cock, his movements becoming less controlled and more animalistic until he finally hit the point. The point of no return where his magic blasted around us, shaking the windows, shit falling off the goddamn dresser as he slammed into me and roared out my name, his hot release filling up and spilling out of me, causing me to shudder in relief.

Holy fuck.

My magic rose up almost instantly, breaking the hold he had on us and looping around him and tightening. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me with an intensity and vibrancy that I didn’t normally associate with my magic. I swallowed, watching a tattoo form on his neck as his fingers traced my shoulders, letting me know that his mark was there as well. I really didn’t understand how any of this shit worked, but I felt tears streaming from my eyes in relief. Contentment. A bunch of shit. Mostly, the relief that I hadn’t hurt him.

I moaned as he pulled back and pushed back in, his hands gripping my legs as he sat back slightly, a smile lighting his face. “You said you loved me.”

“I do,” I mused sleepily, unable to stop the stupid smile that formed on my face.

“And you marked me.” He darted forward, kissing my shoulder. Alright, this man was being absolutely adorable right now. This playful, light attitude was so at contrast with the intensity of the previous moment and somehow absolutely perfect.

“I did.” I squirmed against him, feeling our cum mixing between us.

His lips pressed against mine before his eyes darkened with a searing heat once again. “And you let me cum inside of you.”

I laughed and offered an arched brow as he held himself above me. “I don’t recall you asking, Mad.”

He made a happy noise, pulling out and pushing back in as both of us shuddered in relief, my fingers sliding over his neck. My smile grew.

“Plus, I went back on a birth control spell the minute I got to the castle.”

Maddox frowned, his eyes narrowing on my face before he leaned down to nip my neck in punishment. I let out a small amused laugh as he rolled us, his cock still hard inside of me as he finally pulled out, my body laid on top of his as he scowled.

“What?” I mused, running my fingers through his hair.

His eyes sparked. “I’m not in the business of scaring the hell out of you. Trust me, you don’t want to know what I’m thinking.”

“Maybe I do,” I mused, running my fingers up his chest.

Before either of us could respond, the front door opened, and familiar voices filled the space. My eyes went wide, and Maddox barked out a laugh as I pulled him from bed towards the bathroom. I relaxed slightly as the door locked and he turned on the shower for us, my arms wrapping around him as warm water washed across us.

“You know they all know, right?” he asked with a smirk on his face. “And are fucking jealous bastards. You may have to deal with that.”

“I don’t care if they know,” I said as I ran my nose against his neck, “but I also haven’t been naked around many people… I may be a tad shy about it still.”

“You have seven mates,” Mad pointed out with a sly grin. “Being naked is something you will have to get used to.”

I rolled my eyes and then let out a soft sound at his fingers on my body, washing my skin and hair gently. I honestly couldn’t tell you how long we were in there before Maddox was gently ushering me out of the shower, his

hands braiding my hair before drying me off. It was such a sweet gesture, and the soft French song he was singing under his breath had me relaxing completely.

“Where did you learn French?” I asked softly.

His lips pressed into a small smile. “Chait and I learned it so we could talk shit about the people in our class, figured an Earth realm language was a good choice.”

I let out a laugh as he flashed me a smile, his lips pressing to my shoulder before wrapping me in a robe.

“Come on, teacup,” he said as he wrapped a towel around his waist. “I hope you are feeling more energized now.”

“Why?”

My question was answered as I walked into the bedroom, finding Zed sitting on the edge of Maddox’s bed looking like he was damn near pouting. I had to cover my mouth to stop from laughing. His eyes narrowed on me before jumping to Maddox. “You two are in trouble.”

“Why?” I asked, amused.

Maddox went to grab clothes as Zed tugged me forward to step between his legs. I ran my fingers through his dark hair as he offered me a small pout.

“Everyone who is bonded to you could feel everything,” —he flashed a smile as I blushed— “and you smell like sex and it’s fucking delicious. Please stop.”

“I can’t stop smelling like sex,” I teased, loving his blunt nature.

“He means you smell like me, it’s not the sex part that bothers him,” Maddox chuckled, kissing my temple before leaving the room, wearing only a pair of sweatpants. Desire flashed over me as Zed groaned, burying his head in my stomach. I ran my fingers over his skin, realizing that his magic was jumping with way more heat than normal.

“Does being around sex affect your magic that much?” I asked, sincerely curious. His ears heated, but he tossed me a smirk.

“Yes,” he replied. “Which is why you need to get dressed before my demon decides we need to mark you with our magic and cum instead of his.”

“Zed!” I blushed as he winked. I shook my head, his chuckle following me as I left the room. As I made my way into my room, I found a comfortable pair of sweats and an oversized shirt, both of which appeared

to be new. I really needed to yell at them about that. I let out a hum as I walked out into the hall and almost immediately ran into Cannon. He let out a low rumble and lifted me into his arms, his forearms crossing underneath my butt as I ran my hands through his hair, offering him a sleepy smile.

Without a word, he brought me into the living room and sat me down, pulling me onto his lap before he literally started nuzzling my neck. I let out a small laugh as I wrapped my arms around him, not fully knowing what he was doing.

“Are you fucking serious?” Maddox asked, looking over from where he was standing with Chait. Chait, who was looking at me with a sexy smile while cooking something that smelled delicious.

“What?” Cannon mumbled, rubbing his cheek on my shirt.

“You’re literally fucking scenting her!” Maddox exclaimed. “You are unreal, man.”

“If you do that after her and I have sex, I’ll kill you,” Valerio threatened, drawing my attention to where he was sitting across from us, the papers on his lap long forgotten.

“Who said we’re having sex?” I teased, my lips pulling up as Valerio narrowed his eyes at me.

“Yeah, Valerio,” Philip said, bringing me a glass of wine. “She might not even like you.”

I let out a laugh as Philip sat next to us, his fingers brushing over my back as I shivered but leaned into it. Valerio offered me a look, his eyes running over my skin. I blushed, unable to stop the reaction his dark eyes inspired.

“She likes me,” Valerio said in conclusion, looking back down at his paperwork. Damn him. Damn him to hell.

“Where is Charm?” I asked suddenly. Chait chuckled.

“Out back,” he answered. “Couldn’t handle being in the house when we first came home.”

I shook my head, wondering why the hell this wasn’t more awkward as I happily made my way towards the back of the house. I inhaled the scent from the kitchen as I smiled, finding Charm leaning on the back balcony looking over the forest, his blonde hair hanging at his shoulders.

I could see the slight tension in his frame, but as I pushed through the door, my feet hitting the cold wood, he instantly turned around. A low rumble broke from his throat as I took the chance to just wrap my arms

around his muscular waist. Charm chuckled, wrapping me up as he brushed his lips across my forehead.

“Sorry,” I teased, pulling back.

“It’s not your fault,” he said with a cocky smile. “I prefer your desire. It’s their bullshit that I get tired of. I mean, I get it, really… I really, really get it. But fuck. It’s a lot.”

“Never had this issue before?” I teased, wondering if they had ever shared someone as a group before. My stomach clenched, hating that idea. A rage rolled over my skin, making me furious at the idea of—

Charm kissed me gently and pulled me from those thoughts as he tossed me a smirk. “Don’t worry, birdy, you’re the only girl for us.”

I couldn’t help but smile as he pulled me into the house. I was glad he said that… because they were turning out to be the men for me. Absolutely.

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CHAPTER 12

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MADDOX

I narrowed my eyes at Cannon, his cheek pressed against the top of Maize's head as he and Charm sat next to her watching television. If the bastard continued to rub my scent off of her, I was going to absolutely lose my shit. He knew it, too, his eyes moving towards me as he brushed a kiss on top of her head, offering me a smug smile.

Asshole.

My jaw clenched with frustration as Chait chuckled, making me snap my head to the side as I sat down at the kitchen island while he made dinner. In part it was to keep him company, but it was mainly to make sure she had food to eat. I knew she had probably eaten recently, but since I hadn't personally seen her eat, I had the unreasonable urge to make sure she was fed. It was something that normally existed, and had for the past year or so… but I just wasn't bothering to fight it tonight.

I don't think my magic would have allowed it.

"Tu a besoin de te relaxer," Chait commented as I felt my face slip into a scowl.

"Il sait exactement ce qu'il fait," I muttered, my cock twitching at the idea of taking her back upstairs, pinning her down, and filling her with my cum again just to prove a point. I'd never been competitive with my teammates, but of course with Maize it was different, and Cannon was being absolutely fucking ridiculous right now. It wasn't his wolf, either—I mean, in part, sure, but it was very much both of them.

Chait shook his head, knowing that I was on my bullshit right now. I couldn't help it. It wasn't like Chait didn't know how I felt about Maize. How I had avoided getting too close to her too fast because I had zero

goddamn control, as shown by tonight. I'd done my best to keep a distance, to not obsess over her openly, to form a relationship with her without scaring the shit out of her. I thought I'd had control over my actions, until, of course, she had touched me in any way that wasn't brief in nature. Then I'd been fucked, because knowing that she felt the same level of desire that I felt for her fucked with my head in the best way possible.

Somehow, despite my attempt, I'd also fallen in love with her, and to hear she loved me back did something to my chest. Something explosive and dangerous to someone like me. I'd spent my entire life without any semblance of love. I cared about my team, and Chait was the closest thing I had to a brother, but love? No. I had never felt an emotion like that in my life, and when I had finally come to terms with my emotions with Maize, it had still taken what felt like forever to not be overwhelmed by the notion.

Maize just had that effect on me, though. Overwhelming and almost uncontrollable. She made me want to do things that made no goddamn sense. The Cannon issue was a perfect example. I was about as far from a shifter as possible, but I had the urge to mark and claim every single part of her. My chest squeezed at the small mark on her shoulder, a vibrant swirl that was outlined and bright against her skin.

I wanted more on her skin. I wanted her skin covered in my name. Hell, maybe I would just tattoo my body with her name. How long could I keep an urge like that a secret? A weird high-like thrill ran through me as I considered the spectrum of insanity my thoughts were breaching on. It didn't change them, but there was a small part of me that wondered if I should be concerned.

I would probably continue to ignore it, assuming that it would go away or lessen in intensity until… well, until it either did or I did something extreme enough that Maize realized just how crazy I was. Honestly, I didn't really have control over it at this point. Would it sound bad if I told her that? That I didn't have control over my actions and that she held the metaphorical puppet strings? All the power? I wasn't positive how my teacup would take that. Some people would love knowing they had that much power over another, but not Maize. It would probably worry her.

That made me love her all the more. It also solidified the level of devotion I had towards her that demanded I do whatever she wanted, even if it wasn't the smartest choice. I knew that was why the balance of our group was so damn important. Someone like Valerio or Charm would stop

her from doing something if they didn’t think it was a good idea, whereas I would just give her whatever she wanted. I wouldn’t let her go, but I would follow her and kill for her… and I really needed to get out of my head tonight. If I’d thought my mindset was fucked before having touched and tasted Maize, it was nothing compared to know.

The chair next to me made a noise as it was pulled out, Valerio sitting down before stacking a large assortment of papers on the table in front of him. Our leader pinned me with a look as I offered him an arched brow, not bothering to try to push into his head, because I knew he would tell me whatever it was he was on about now. I never knew with him, and usually he tended to surprise me.

“Was she okay?” he asked softly, concern flashing through his gaze. He’d been worried about her trauma and no doubt how that had affected us being together. I couldn’t lie, it had been something that had worried me at first as well, hence my warning to her about my lack of control. But I also hadn’t been able to stop from giving her what she wanted, especially if that was me. Nor had I wanted to ruin the surge of confidence and heat in her expression, making me know that despite a bit of nerves, Maize had really wanted what happened between us.

Of course, it helped that my magic had not only infiltrated her entire system, but that I’d kept tabs on her thoughts. If there had been a hint of panic or previous memories from being cornered by the guards or the first man that she had been with, I would have instantly pulled back. Especially since she had put her trust in me to dominate her sexy body. Well, not just her body, her magic and her mind as well. I had been shocked by the amount of power she’d given up to me, and half in awe and really fucking turned on that someone as powerful as Maize would do that. So, of course, I would fucking do anything to protect that. I would never break her trust, even if it meant doing extreme and crazy shit.

I nodded. “Yeah, my magic just restrained hers after she let me take control, so that wasn’t a problem. And the other part… it didn’t seem to be an issue. I was keeping tabs on her emotions and mentality, though.”

“Took control?” He narrowed his gaze in thought.

“Mhm.” I smirked at what was running through his head. “She very willingly allowed it.”

Valerio’s jaw clenched as his thoughts broke from his mental wards. He stood up, muttering a curse as I barked out a laugh. Good to know I wasn’t

the only one who found that attractive. He crossed the room easily before sitting down in front of her, his back against the couch as her fingers ran through his hair. I think it was the first time I'd ever seen him sit on the floor like that. Hell, I rarely ever saw him relax. Interesting.

"Il l'aime," I told Chait knowingly. My friend offered me a 'no shit' look as Maize let out a small yawn and snuggled against Charm. His face lifted into a small smile that she didn't see. He would probably be pissed if she did, but he would be absolutely livid if I ever revealed what he was thinking. Literally, the man would fucking gut me.

While I didn't fully understand her magic, I could feel the connection her magic had made with Chait, Philip, and Charm. I also had far easier access to their minds than normal, and while I was attempting to stay clear for privacy, I had a feeling the bond was purposefully trying to allow for that. Allow for that level of connection.

I knew Maize thought her magic was unnatural. Thought that the way she bonded us was fucked up. I think it was very natural, especially to her, and I think it was just different than she had ever experienced before in her small world within the Dark Fae kingdom. Hell, if there was one thing the Horde taught me, it was that magic created the most unique and unlikely of situations.

Who said the way mating bonds formed had to all be the same?

I just wished that there was a way to make her more comfortable with her magic. To make her realize that she was perfect how she was. Although, I think her experience with Philip and I, in terms of how different our bonds were formed, had given her a small amount of hope she hadn't expected. It would be interesting to see how she bonded with the others, because I had no doubt that would happen.

Honestly, I was shocked that Valerio had been so patient. Despite being our lead commander loving his autonomy and independence—essential to leadership, in his mind—I could hear his thoughts loud and clear. Charm could also no doubt feel his desire to mark Maize and be marked. It was fascinating that he was so willing to give into a mating bond, and it made me wonder if maybe he hadn't been a bit more lonely than he would admit to.

I had no doubt Cannon would be more patient, but Zed could happen at any time. The man made irrational decisions, and we usually had to clean up after him, so no doubt it would be completely random and because of

something that none of us had expected. It was almost a certain thing. I rolled my eyes as the man in question stared at Maize before looking back at the television, looking like he was sulking for not being closer to her right now. *Join the fucking club.*

A small groan almost broke from my throat, thinking about getting back in bed with Maize. I wanted to explore her more, take my time, and more than anything, I needed to bury myself back inside of her. Both physically and magically. I'd been craving a connection with her for so long, and now it was all that I wanted. Couldn't I be selfish and lock her in my bedroom for a period of time or something? I felt like I had done crazier shit than that. Not when it came to a woman, but just in general.

Talking about crazy shit that had popped in my mind...

"She's on birth control," I muttered, a frown slipping on my face as Chait turned to me with a surprised glance. I knew it wasn't about the context of the comment. No, it was because of my put out tone.

I had absolutely no right to feel this way, and she would probably, rightly so, be freaked the fuck out by me if I told her what I was really thinking. What I really wanted to do. I mean, I suppose it didn't surprise me all that much… no, scratch that, it completely did. I had been stuck with a shit childhood, so the idea of ever having children had been extremely unappealing for most of my life.

Now? Well, it didn't sound like the worst idea in the world. Like at all.

Plus, Maize was flighty as fuck. Now that we had a mating bond, she couldn't leave. I hadn't meant for that to happen, specifically, but it was pretty clear that if her magic had bonded her to four of us, a part of her wanted to stay, right? Maker, I hoped so. Which led me to the unreasonable train of thought that insisted that if I put my kid in her, she would be even less inclined to leave. When I'd come inside of her, I hadn't thought twice about birth control because the concept of her getting pregnant did the opposite of scare me. But once she told me she was on protection? I literally fucking started to pout almost. It was ridiculous.

I also wanted to see her pregnant with my kid. Was that weird? Probably. I just found the concept fucking hot, and I had no damn good reason. Like Cannon would have made far more sense, him saying this shit, because he was literally a shifter, and they mated in part to create more shifters. But what excuses did I have? Zero. I just wanted it, and I was thankful she couldn't read my thoughts.

I clearly had some serious problems.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Chait mused, combining the sauce on the stove with whatever he was making, offering me a knowing look.

"It is," I grumbled honestly.

Chait barked out a laugh. "Shut the fuck up. *You* as a father would be terrifying."

I smirked, realizing that was more accurate than I cared to admit. I would probably be a nightmare and ridiculously overprotective. Still, I wasn't opposed to the idea. Now, I wasn't dumb enough to bring that up to the woman now—she had literally just moved in with us, no need to send her running… not that I would let her get far.

There was a tightness to my chest that had resolved, making it easier to breathe as I looked over our peaceful house. I'd always wondered why we had chosen, as a team, to not move in here. I mean, it had been a joint decision that the dorms had been easier to live in for proximity, but it wasn't until we actually moved back here that I realized we'd been waiting for her. This house wouldn't feel the same without her here.

Maize. She had absolutely no idea how much she made this place feel like home. Had no idea how essential she was becoming in our lives. My hand drew down my face as I tried to shake the surge of anxiety and fury at what had happened before. When she had just been taken away from us. There was a lot I could handle, but feeling that type of panic was new to me. I had thought my heart was breaking as I watched her slowly thaw in the mild bathwater, covered in blood and unconscious.

I had also nearly lost it completely. Something that would have no doubt been violent.

I was glad I'd finally told her how I felt. Told her how goddamn in love with her I was. Although hearing it from her lips was possibly the most erotic shit I'd ever heard. I honestly don't know when exactly I fell in love with Maize, but if I had to assume, it was sometime around this past fall that I fully realized it. I'm positive that it happened before that, but I clearly remembered realizing how much I loved her while sitting outside her room after Nova came to ask if we knew of anyone who was draining others' magic. Unfortunately, Maize knew all too well of someone who drained magic, Mario having tortured her for three years. I had truly worried the visit had pushed her to such a far point that she'd finally broken.

I'd been terrified she would leave, and that had pushed me to extremes.

“How many days have you been sitting here?” Chait asked curiously, appearing out of thin air as I moved my eyes from her door momentarily to offer him a small nod of greeting. I was positive I looked like shit, but I was far too engulfed in monitoring what I could hear from the other side of the door while attempting to not invade her mental privacy. It didn’t help that her walls were especially weak right now, practically urging me to push through them so that I could see what she was thinking about. I honestly wasn’t positive I wanted to know. It would probably send me over the edge with panic.

I hadn’t slept yet, either. I was terrified, absolutely terrified, that I would wake up and she would be gone. Just completely having slipped from our lives. I knew if that happened, we may never see her again, and that wasn’t a risk I was willing to take.

Neither was Chait.

Despite Chait’s casual mannerisms and relaxed expression, I knew he had been appearing in her room whenever she slept, which unfortunately wasn’t much. My mouth tightened, thinking about how she hadn’t eaten either. How long was too long? When did we need to intervene?

“Four days.” I inhaled sharply. “Four fucking days.”

Chait’s expression darkened as he ran a hand through his hair, looking undecided about how to handle this. “Should we try to invite her to dinner?”

I shook my head. “She’s finally sleeping. She was up all night, so she only fell asleep sometime around noon.”

“Fuck,” he grunted.

‘Fuck’ was right. My throat tightened as I shook myself, resolving to stay here until I knew for sure she wasn’t leaving. I didn’t care how many days that took. I wouldn’t abandon the woman I loved, even in her darkest times. Even if she didn’t know I was here for her. That was what you did when you loved someone.

You were there for them, even when they didn’t ask you to be.

And there was no question about it, I loved Maize.

It had been almost two and a half more days until she actually left her room, and I’d tried to act like I hadn’t been out there the entire time. Fortunately and unfortunately, she was so hungry and out of it that she barely noticed. Which was good, because after we had some food brought to her room and she fell back asleep, I passed out on the couch in her small

living room suite. The next day brought a renewed sense of energy as she tried to push past it. I'd never brought it up to her, not wanting to bring her back there, but it had made me realize how fundamental she was in my life. How scared I was of losing her.

My team was my family, but Maize was everything.

"Her food is ready," Chait said, sliding me a bowl. I almost smiled at that, knowing he had done that on purpose rather than call out to her. Fucking Cannon would have probably come and grabbed it.

"Teacup," I called out. Her head snapped over to mine, a light pink hitting her cheekbones as I nodded her over. Cannon let out a frustrated sound as Charm narrowed his gaze at me, making me smile as she easily made her way across the space. Did she even realize how graceful she was? How she moved in an almost impossibly light way? Sometimes I doubted her feet actually touched the ground.

"Oh that smells and looks delicious," she said as I grabbed her waist and sat her down in front of me on the other stool. Almost instantly, I trapped her knees between my own as I slid the bowl towards her, willing to watch her eat the entire thing.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she scowled. "You don't eat enough."

I chuckled at that, because while I wasn't particularly hungry, I thought it was fucking adorable that she was worried about my eating habits. Chait passed me a bowl, and as everyone else began to grab their dinner, I ate mine slowly, mostly focused on the pleased and relaxed expression on Maize's face. Chait was talking easily with her, making her laugh, but also making sure to not ask her too many things so that she would actually eat. It was something both of us were a bit paranoid about, because when we first met Maize, she was even more lean than she was now.

Don't get me wrong, the woman was gorgeous, but when we'd first met her, she had looked almost too thin. Almost like she'd been locked in a goddamn dungeon for three years. Imagine that. Over the course of the past year, she had started to fix her eating habits and began taking care of her health, mostly because of our insistence, and more noticeably in the last few days, her appetite had seemed to increase tenfold. I think it had to do in part with her using her magic more and expending more energy, but I hoped it was also because she was feeling more relaxed and happy.

I wanted her constantly comfortable, and while I knew it was impossible to avoid situations that would result in her unhappy… I would

do my damn best.

So much of my life had been filled with a darkness that I knew Maize understood in some ways better than anyone else. I hated that, not because I didn’t want her to understand, but because I knew the pain associated with that darkness.

It was why, despite everything that was going on, I wouldn’t trade this moment for anything. This small moment where everyone seemed at peace. Seemed to breathe a sigh of relief at the concept of Maize safe and in a house with us. The idea, after all this time for Chait and I, was almost unreal. It left me with a sense of contentment that I could have never expected from my life and that I fiercely wanted to protect, no matter what I had to do to ensure that. No matter who I had to hurt to ensure that.

It was clear as day to me that my priorities in the past year had been altered and shifted completely. There was only one thing that mattered now. One person that solidified our family. One person that I would die to protect.

Maize.

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CHAPTER 13

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MAIZE

I woke up cold and alone. *Again.*

This was quickly becoming a pattern that I had absolutely no intention of repeating. So why the hell did I find myself here? My eyes opened, wide and surprised, as I steadied myself. My body was suddenly flooded with heat as my magic started up, almost as if my body had been frozen and I was now able to move again.

Where the fuck was I?

Better question, how the hell had I gotten out here? Where the hell was ‘out here’?

Hadn’t I been sleeping?

I’m almost positive that I’d fallen asleep on the couch after stuffing myself with food and drinking three glasses of wine… which yes, had been amazing, thank you very much. In fact, the entire night had been clouded in a serene, affection-filled haze. I hadn’t even realized how comfortable I was becoming with my mates’ touch until I found myself curled between the arm of the couch with my legs across Valerio’s lap and my feet being massaged by Zed. It had been amazing, and while I still didn’t know the name of the movie we had been watching, it had made the guys laugh enough that I’d found myself enjoying it. It probably helped that at some point Maddox began running his hands through my hair, making my eyes heavy.

Shortly after that, I’d fallen asleep. I would much rather have woken up surrounded by them than whatever this nonsense was… Why couldn’t I get a goddamn break, man?

I swallowed nervously, looking around, wishing that I was back inside my new home. I had been worried how I would adjust, but almost instantly I'd found myself content, and now I was eager to get back.

Instead, I was… in the forest again. My feet were freezing against the icy ground, and the howling winds around me were pulling at my oversized clothes. My fists tightened, preparing for anything that might be out here. I could feel trouble brewing, and I almost felt like eyes were on me, despite not sensing anyone. I didn't like this at all.

"What the hell is going on right now?" I mumbled to myself, turning in a circle and shivering, my body trying to fight the cold. It wasn't working very well. My wings suddenly broke from my back and moved lazily, blocking the worst winds. I frowned, noticing the academy in the distance, which meant our house wasn't far at all… *right?*

I probably should know the area I lived in just a bit better.

Had I broken out of the summoning spell? Was that possible? Had I been under one in the first place? My familiars shifted under my skin, looking slightly dazed as I prayed like hell I hadn't hurt any of my mates. I had to admit, the more that were bonded to me, the less I worried. Even if that was selfish as fuck.

Something shifted in the woods behind me. I turned around and tried to pull my magic forward, the entire nature of it weaker than normal, making me think I'd been halfway to finding myself in the same position as two nights before. I gently pulled in my wings, not trusting them to not make too much noise.

Before I could scream, a hand came over my mouth, making everything in me go still. Not because I was scared, but because I recognized the scent of the body behind me, and it wasn't one that caused fear. My head tilted back as I looked up to find Zed's intense gaze focused on the forested landscape in front of me, his other hand stroking my pulse as if it was comforting him. I ran a hand over his forearm as the large arm slipped down to hold my waist firmly.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" he asked softly, his voice filled with panic underneath a cold, almost clinical tone. Honestly, I knew I hadn't been around Zed very long, but this wasn't a side to him I'd seen before, and it was easy to understand how scary he could get if he wanted to. Right now he didn't even have his trademark slightly sadistic smirk.

Instead, there was just nothing, and he was searching the space like a predator would.

Now why the hell did I find that sexy? I needed help, that's what I needed.

"I have no idea," I murmured gently as he removed his other hand from my mouth. "I woke up a second ago, just standing here. I think I broke out of it, whatever 'it' is. I think it was them again."

"I knew something was wrong," he muttered, almost to himself. "I woke up and went downstairs, and you were gone from the couch. I have no idea how the hell you got out. The doors were all still locked from the inside."

A chill of apprehension ran over my skin as a concerned sound broke from my throat. I let down my barriers as I ran my magic against his to soothe it gently. His body shuddered slightly before he pressed his forehead against my shoulder. I could feel him striving for some level of control, and while I appreciated that, I think I knew that our magic worked better together. Don't ask me how I knew that, but I was starting to trust my instincts more, which was scary as hell.

There was a reason that Charm's magic was combative against mine. There was a reason that Chait's magic seemed to soften mine. A reason that Philip's magic almost effortlessly pulled on mine. Or how Maddox's magic dominated mine. It was a natural pull, and it affected the dynamic of our relationship and the bond we had. I could no longer deny that this wasn't a mistake. This was how it was supposed to be, and I knew that mine and Zed's magic, bound or unbound, would be more effective together.

"Maybe the mating bonds made the spell easier to break? Your magic feels really strong… but also different. You smell different, not like you." He sniffed my neck, letting out a low growl as his eyes traveled the space. "I can tell someone else is out here. We need to get back inside."

I didn't disagree with him at all.

Turning into him, his hand cupped my jaw, looking over my shoulder before pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. I moaned into it lightly, only allowing myself a moment to truly enjoy it before allowing my senses to move out and to sharpen. Unfortunately, it was a moment too long. That had been the opening they'd been waiting for.

"Zed!" My voice broke as a dark shadow of magic appeared behind him, sending a shockwave of magic through both of us like an electric bolt.

I let out a grunt of pain, my knees breaking as everything spotted black for a moment. I clung to Zed, who dropped like a brick, his nose bleeding as his magic seemed to flicker out like a goddamn light. Panicking, I clung to him, trying to infuse my magic with his, but I could feel something draining me. Pulling at my essence like death its-goddamn-self.

The magic over us grew heavier, thicker, and colder, making me dizzy. Before I knew it, my eyes were closing, and the last thing I did, the last thing I had the energy to do, was send out a faint call for help through our mating bond before everything went dark all at once.

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EPILOGUE

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ZED

Now why the hell did this feel familiar?

Opening my eyes, my vision swam as I groaned, realizing that I was hanging upside fucking down. Blood rushed to my head as I tried to right myself, only to let out a wince, a tearing sensation pulling on the skin of my back.

Motherfucker. There were hooks in my back, I could feel it, and blood was now trickling down my spine and onto my neck as it began to trail down my jaw.

I forced myself to look around, finding a stone floor about five feet below me. The room was dark and cold around me, the same heavy darkness of magic that had appeared before I was knocked out still very present.

Panic surged through me as I thought about the fear and pain in Maize's stunning eyes before everything had gone dark. The last thing I remembered clearly was dropping like a goddamn rock as she clung to me, my magic attempting to shield her from whatever the hell had snuck up on us.

"Maize?" I called out hoarsely, turning my neck to the side, needing to get eyes on her. Fury rolled through me, finding my angel hanging in the same position as myself but in iron bands. Her face was red with struggle, her breathing rough, the sound of sizzling letting me know that her skin was being burned. I let out a hiss, refusing to give into the rage that was trying to distract me.

"Zed," she whispered, her gaze meeting mine, nearly black. "We need to get out of here."

She was right—we really fucking did. I hoped like fucking hell that the others had noticed we were gone, because I could barely keep my eyes open, let alone use my magic. My breathing was rough as I fought the urge to let the hooks rip through my skin just to get to her. I didn't think I would bleed out, but then again, I had absolutely no idea how I would heal right now. Nothing felt right.

"Breathe, angel, we'll figure this out," I assured her, trying to sound stronger than I actually was. Images from the trauma I'd suffered on Earth were flashing through my vision, but I was pretending that wasn't happening. I had bigger things to focus on. Once I got her out of here, I could travel down that dark rabbit hole, but not until then.

"No, you don't understand," she whimpered, legitimate fear spreading across her expression. "This is *so* much worse than I realized."

Before I could ask her what she meant, to look into the actual terror that was radiating through her gaze, a loud metal door slammed open. Blood dripped down my face as my vision blurred, but when it finally cleared up, I found myself looking into what I knew had terrified Maize.

We were so fucked.

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AFTERWORD

Interested in following Maize on her journey? The first three books of the **Lost in Fae** series are now available for purchase! Make sure to pick up ***Freeing Fae*** today!

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M. SINCLAIR

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M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently, in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!

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M. Sinclair has crafted different universes with unique plotlines, character cameos, and shared universe events. As a reader, this means that you may see your favorite character or characters… appear in multiple books besides their own storyline.

Universe 1

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Vengeance

Book 1 - Savages

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Book 3 - Shadow Glass

Book 4 - Fire & Smoke

Book 5 - Dark King

Complete Series

A Raven Masques Novel - Birth of a Raven

Tears of the Siren

Book 1 - Horror of Your Heart

Book 2 - Broken House

Book 3 - Neon Drops

Descendant

Book 1 - Descendant of Chaos

Book 2 - Descendant of Blood

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Book 2 - Soaring In Flames

Book 3 - Realm Of Flames

The Wronged

Book 1 - Wicked Blaze Correctional

Book 2 - Evading Wicked Blaze

Book 3 - Defeating Wicked Blaze

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Book 3 - Freeing Fae

Universe 2

Established in 2020

Court of Rella

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Paranormal/Fantasy Series

(These series are not currently affiliated with a specific universe)

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Book 1 - Queen of the Dead

Book 2 - Team Time with the Dead

Book 3 - Dying for the Dead

Completed Series

Silver Falls University

Book 1 - Lost

I.S.S.

Book 1 - Soothing Nightmares

Contemporary Universe

Established in 2021

The Shadows of Wildberry Lane Trilogy

Book 1 - Perfection of Suffering

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Peridot (Jewels Cafe Series)

Time for Sensibility (Women of Time)

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